Whispers From The Shadows
THE LEGEND OF THE LADY IN RED
Morgan Stewart

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"Never to suffer would never to have been blessed."

Edgar Allan Poe

Whispers from the Shadows

The legend of the lady in red series

Chapter 1

Mina

“I guess this is the town,” I mumble, scrunching up the map and throwing it onto my passenger seat. I shift the gear stick into park and turn off the ignition before winding up the window and sealing myself inside the car on this warm night. The car keys jingle as I climb out of the car to better examine the small township of Dale.

This place is more of a forest than a thriving area most supernaturals tend to inhabit, making me curious about why I’m here.

The main street is empty, which makes sense for this time of night. All the shops are closed with shutters secured against an absent threat. I’m sure this place would have been beautiful in its prime. Now it’s a poor dilapidated reminder of a better time.

I survey the forest lining on the other side of the road. An owl hoots as it swoops above the pine trees. That’s all the activity my natural senses can detect without utilising my magic to search further into the darkness.

A glowing light catches my attention at the end of the strip. Walking to the corner store, I stay vigilant for the werewolves I was sent here to meet. I’m early, not by much, but enough to not be offended that they aren’t here already waiting for me.

The bell above the convenience store door jingles as I enter. The cracked linoleum flooring and light dust-coated stands sadden the shop, which hasn’t been in its heyday in decades.

Giggling at the back of the shop has me cocking my head to the side in curiosity. Two teens, still sporting their school backpacks, are daring each other to buy something they will regret later.

Humans usually do.

They think it’s funny and radical to buy a Red-Eye fizzy drink for the temporary energy boost it provides. What they have yet to learn, or likely ever will, is that it’s one of the best-kept secrets vampires have besides our existence in the world. It’s become a joke of our kind. Humans consume our drinks… and we consume the humans.

To humans, the Red-Eye drink provides them with a huge buzz, like having a few too many espressos. That is how it's explained away on the side of the bottle. For teens exploring those rebellious years, the beverage has become a way to act out along with their cigarettes and loitering behind buildings. All the stuff that makes human adults uncomfortable.

Well… that's what I've been told.

It was an ingenious invention that has allowed vampires more options for feeding while remaining in hiding. The best part was how it was made to be easily available when a vampire needs something to fend off the blood cravings for a while. It doesn't permanently stave off the need for blood, but drinking it dramatically reduces our need to consume blood.

The invention of the human carbonated drink created a way to distribute our products without drawing attention to the sustenance it conceals. And finally, the distribution, because what's more convenient than a convenience store?

With a sway of my hips, I move down the first aisle. My fingers brush over the different varieties of packaged chips before the shelf becomes the home for the bags of colourful lollies. I pause as I pass a packet of pink musk sticks. My fingers tap it twice before I indulge them and grab them to purchase.

I've always been a sucker for a sweet.

When I reach the giggling teenagers, they ignore me as they find the courage to pick up a bottle of the original flavoured Red-Eye. Their jackets have their names embossed on them, telling me that they must be high school seniors.

"If you're going to try one, you should go for Fruits of the Forest Red-Eye. It's a bit juicier in flavour," I tell them.

They spin around to face me, startled by my appearance at their backs. A slight gasp slips out from one while the other tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

The one with long black hair and a heavy fringe gives me an assessing look. It doesn't bother me since I would take as much interest in a stranger if I lived in such a quiet, uneventful place.

I offer a slight nod, and the other teen, who was heavy-handed with her eye makeup, squeals in excitement.

"Okay!" She spins and swaps out the bottle for the fruity energy drink, "We are going to a gathering tonight," she tells me. I shrug because I

couldn’t care less about these girls and their plans. The heavy eyeliner teen gives me another grin before dragging her fringed friend away by the elbow.

I grab a bottle of the original flavour, the bottle behind the one they were toying with, and make my way to the counter.

A battle-scarred attendant rolls her eyes when the teens place coins on the counter they dug from the depths of their pockets.

I keep my distance to enjoy the discomfort in the transaction. The girls are no longer giggling but a ripe red, which ruins the gothic vibe they are trying to create.

Gothic! Ha. I shake my head in dismay at what this world has become.

The cash register dings as it springs open so the attendant can add the collection of coins. They rush out of the shop with their purchase, ignoring the change the old wench tries to hand them. She grumbles before dropping the coins back into the register.

“My boss only keeps that terrible drink stocked for the teens to mess around with. No one other than truckies ever buys it.”

“It’s better than them tricking you into selling them beer,” I respond, placing my drink on the counter. The attendant absently nods until her gaze lands on my purchase. One Red-Eye and a bag of pink musk sticks. Her eyes dart up, and her nose scrunches as she takes in my appearance. “Or maybe your boss keeps it stocked because it gives the kids a little buzz to stop them from seeking out the harder ones,” I add.

Her eyes drag over my outfit, judging me for having an opinion. It’s not my opinion that she finds offensive, but the obvious fact that I’m not from around here. I’m not sure what assumptions she can make during her inspection of my faded denim jeans, black tee shirt, and leather jacket.

“Maybe,” she says through gritted teeth. Her eyes remain trained on me as her practised hands process the transaction.

“Forty-five cents.”

I reach into my backpack and dig out the hideous wallet I was gifted for my birthday from my devious roommates. I’m still trying to determine if this is a joke or considered fashion.

Shivers go down my spine as I open the velcro and unfold the scratchy, stiff material. I grab a crisp five-dollar bill, place it flat on the counter, and slowly slide it toward her. She only takes the money once I

have claimed my goods and stepped back from the counter. The change from the transaction is placed between us, making me slap a hand down and slide the coins to my side of the counter. All this happens while we remain in some kind of old Western standoff.

When reaching the exit, I call over my shoulder, waving my delicious drink in the air, “Tell your boss thank you for keeping this stocked. It is a lifesaver for those of us who need that evening hit.”

The bell jiggles again to signal my exit as the door slaps closed behind me.

My backpack chirps alarmingly loud. I slip it off to fish out my new mobile phone. I hold it up while trying to remember the instruction I was given for this piece of technological torture. Greta told me that I had to press the little green phone button. That’s the one that connects the call. With my pointer finger, I press the button and put the bulky thing next to my head.

“I hate this thing,” I grumble at the being on the other side.

A feminine chuckle has my frustration fading away. “You thought the light bulb wasn’t going to last. Let me assure you, Mina, that cellular phones are here to stay.” She snorts.

“If you say so. What do you want, Greta?” I ask, munching on one of the musk sticks.

“I’m checking that you arrived safely.” There is a slight pop of the strawberry gum she’s always chewing. Greta’s always been one to indulge in unhealthy habits. I take another bite of my sweet.

“Arrived. Bought a drink. Now, I’m just waiting for my escorts to collect me.” I kick the curb, disturbing the gravel that makes up the road.

“They are late?” Greta snaps, now performing the role of my handler. She takes her work very seriously. If something happens that isn’t planned, then you need pliers to pry her hands out of her hair. “I was very specific about your arrival time.”

“It’s fine.” I try to sound calm since this slight will make her rage for hours.

“Fucking wolves. It’s always the same with the mutts. It’s their way or no way.” There is a flickering of a lighter in the background, making me groan. Stress from Greta means ditching the gum and embracing a cigarette.

I freeze as the scent of wolf hits like a freight train. Sense of smell is not usually considered a strength for a vampire. Out in all this fresh, clean country air, I could scent a cow in the next county over if I tried.

Something rustles behind me, and I slowly turn to face off with the creatures hiding in the forest on the other side of the road.

“My guides have arrived,” I say before tucking the phone back into my bag. As I tug the zipper closed, Greta's voice screams from my bag about pressing a red button. I find the red one and jab my finger at it before staring into the distance and waiting for the werewolves to show themselves.

“You’d think I’d enjoy the fresh air of the country but give me piss-filled alleyways and petrol-stained roads any day. It dulls the senses so that the wet-dog odour of your kind isn’t so repulsive.” I say it just loud enough for their doggy ears to hear me. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.” I flick more gravel with my boot in the direction they are lurking.

After a pause, a wolf steps forward just enough for its paws and head to poke out of the surrounding shrubbery.

After a long moment of sizing me up, the beast paws at the ground before stepping back into the bushes, clearly wanting me to follow. Cracking open my bottle of Red-Eye, I take a sip and then let it hang in my hand idly by my side.

Entering the forest, I find the wolf and a friend sitting side by side. As I meet the largest one’s eyes, he tries to pin me with his ploy of dominance.

“Oh, Grandma, what big eyes you have,” I say, bending at the knee and giving a slow clap, mindful not to squish my drink around.

The other slightly smaller wolf huffs in a way that I’m interpreting as a laugh, and I wink at him. The big wolf bares his teeth at me.

“I’m not liking this welcome,” I inform the rude wolves. I stand tall and take a long drink of my Red-Eye. “I have been sent here to help, and this is my reception?”

I purse my lips which triggers my shadows to stretch and unwind from my body to search the area for any other threats. The wolves are the only beasts in the immediate area, which calms my nerves a little. The mutts tense at my unusual coloured shadows. Shadow Mages are rare and barely heard of anymore. While the magic produced by a Shadow Mage presents in shades of black, only one mage has ever had red shadows. Me.

Knowing it will piss the wolves off, I wrap myself in my crimson shadows, creating the famous cape and hood that has become part of my infamy. The bigger wolf growls, causing drool to fly from his mouth like the rabid animal he is. He takes a few steps back and then comes forward again, while the smaller wolf gets down to their belly in a position of full submission.

"What big teeth you have," I say sweetly before glaring at the threatening wolf. "Play this game as long as you want, wolf. I have the moniker to back up my credentials of wins against your kind." I take a step forward, and when he doesn't react, I continue until we are on the same side of the road. "The other option is, of course, taking me to your alpha so I can do what I was sent here to do. What will it be, mutt?"

Shall we kill them?

I shove down that thought as it snakes its way through my mind.

The other wolf belly-crawls until they are between us. From the musty stench they ply the air with, they are both males. They never send the females even though we are much more of the agreeable sex. You'd think the powers above wanted us to bicker.

The small wolf stumbles to his feet and meets the other wolf's gaze, but it's not confrontational. They must be using their pack magic to speak because the bigger wolf relents and turns before bolting into the forest. The smaller wolf glances at me before tipping his head in the direction of the woods. He trots after the wolf and only increases his speed when I follow with my red shadows wrapped tightly around me.

The forest opens to reveal a small suburban cul-de-sac. It's a quaint street with manicured lawns, perfect hedging, and white picket fences. It's a place you'd expect to keep you safe from the trouble of supernaturals.

I take a moment to search the area as I contemplate why I was the one who was sent here. The brief was simple. There was a murder, and we need you to investigate. Investigating is not the type of work I am usually assigned to do, and I've never found myself in such an idyllic location in all the decades of doing this job.

The wolves dart to the last house on the street before the forest takes up the rest of the circular shape. The silence is broken by the faint voices of families performing their evening rituals in the surrounding homes. Even on a road lined with homes, the remoteness of this area is uncomfortable for a

city-dwelling supernatural like me. Experiencing wildlife during the dark hours isn't something I've allowed into my nightscape for years. I prefer the humming of lights and melody sirens as my lullaby.

As we pass under a street sign, I do a double take at the name of this place.

"Wilhelmina Crescent," I murmur as knots form in my stomach.

How odd.

It's not a popular name and hasn't been in a long time. As a child, only my grandparents used to call me Wilhelmina. Everyone else only ever called me Mina.

My gut is screaming at me, telling me something is off here. The feeling causes havoc with my shadows as they fight to have a more protective role around me.

A gruff-looking man walks outside the house accompanied by a few men flanking him. The fly screen slaps closed behind the stern group. I blanch at how similar we are dressed in our faded jeans and leather jackets.

From first appearances, you'd assume he was barely in his thirties. The energy radiating off him tells a story of a man well into the hundreds. Maybe close to a thousand years old.

He rubs his hands over the head of each wolf as they come and sits by his feet. The two wolves sink into the paternal touch and security that only an alpha can provide. Once the alpha is reassured that his wolves remain in full health, the man finally acknowledges my presence.

He tries to ignore the red shadows hovering around me. It doesn't last long as he bares his teeth and takes a more aggressive stance with his feet apart while ushering his wolves behind him.

"I was told there wouldn't be any theatrics." His voice sounds like boots on gravel.

"So was I," I counter, relaxing my shadows to appear like silk around me, not pointy weapons ready to be called to action. "They approached me in their wolf forms. I will not be threatened."

"They weren't there to threat–"

"I don't like to be threatened," I say calmly. "Do not play your silly alpha games with me. That folly might be called politics amongst the wolf family. They, however, do not work on me. I am here as a favour to your kind and my allegiance to the Council."

The alpha assesses me again. This time he's not looking at a woman with the silly red clouds but an adversary he just offended. I'm here as a representative to the Council, our rulers. This alpha runs a small pack in the middle of nowhere. I think he is beginning to understand that I'm the foot, and he is the insignificant bug.

"Noted." He allows his body to prop against the front porch railing. "I'd never want to insult or threaten someone working for the Guard. They usually send wolves to deal with us. I am more comfortable with wolves than some living fairy tale."

"If I am a fairy tale, that would make you either my villain or my happily ever after," I counter with a smirk. "Let's hope it's the latter. Though I prefer my men with a little less wolf." I let my shadows dissolve completely, allowing the man to relax a little.

He wipes his hand on the side of his trousers and offers it to me. "Alpha Brandon Berrick of the Berrick Pack."

"Well met, Alpha Berrick. Mina Harker of the Guard," I reply, accepting the hand.

"Well met, Mrs Harker." There is humour in the greeting, clearly knowing who I am. I grit my teeth at the name he calls me, but I don't bother correcting him. It wouldn't matter to someone as old as him.

"What does she guard?" someone whispers. When I find the man behind the question, he shrinks under my stare.

"She's not a guard. They call her a Hunter because of her role in the Supernatural Guard. Be quiet. No more interruptions," another wolf grumbles.

"What do you teach your wolves here, Alpha?" I ask with my hands secured on my hips.

"He's newly turned." The Alpha shakes his head before hushing the wolf.

"The Guard, baby wolf," I say, ignoring the alpha's grumbles, "are the monsters in charge of investigating supernatural crimes. The Council creates the laws, and the Guard upholds them."

"And the Hunters?" the new wolf dares to ask.

"They are the ghosts of the night. If a Hunter is coming for you, you are already dead. They are cruel and soulless monsters who take pleasure in killing us," the Alpha adds, though I don't think he intended for me to hear that.

“Education time is over now,” I snap. “What do I need to know about this murder? Where are the bodies? I don’t want to lose another moment of the night. It’s already taken me several hours to travel out here.”

My request has Alpha Berrick snapping back to professionalism as he straightens.

“Yes, of course. A young human couple. Both twenty-three. They were reported missing after they failed to attend their jobs on Monday.” I nod and follow him as he enters the house. He stops in the short entry hall as he speaks over his shoulder. “The local police were sent to check their home.” He runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “In all honesty, everyone thought they might have gone fishing and forgot to tell their employers. It’s irresponsible, but some of the young ones here get carried away like that. I’m sure you can remember being young.”

“I do.” I lift my bottle of Red-Eye to show him my drink. “Does it bother you if I finish this?”

“I’d prefer it if you did. My pack would be more comfortable with a freshly fed vampire than a starving one.” He chuckles to soften the truth of that statement.

“Thank you.” I take a bigger gulp of my drink. It tastes better now that it has warmed a little in the night air.

“The couple was found dead inside the house by the officer sent for the welfare check,” Alpha Berrick says.

“Family didn’t find them?” I ask as I try to peer further into the house.

“No. I’ve been told that they are both from farming families who all live an hour or so by car. It was faster to send the police. The officer entered through the front door, which was found unlocked. The male was discovered in the living area with his throat torn out. The lady…” He hardens, and for the first time, he’s genuinely furious. “They found her in the bedroom.”

That has the drink in my mouth dissolving into dust and becoming near impossible to swallow.

“Heavens above,” I mumble, aware that this scene will imprint in my memories. “Show me the man first.”

Death is never more frightening when you are faced with the possibility of forever. Humans never appreciate the gift they have of

knowing their lives will one day end. Though these humans were robbed of the years they deserved.

Alpha Berrick leads me into the house, and I recoil at the potent smell of decay. An involuntary hiss escapes me as my body screams not to touch the dead. Three other werewolves, in their human form, join us. The wariness weighting their expressions makes it clear that these deaths are hitting this town hard.

“I would think you’d be used to death,” the alpha says with too much swagger for a man who needs my help.

“Vampires want prey with a pulse. Death does not serve vampires at all – not for food or to preserve the secret of our existence. A vampire following the laws should stop feeding from a human when their pulse weakens and they become woozy. Needlessly killing humans has been against the law since the laws were created.”

Alpha Berrick doesn’t appreciate the explanation. He shows me his back as he shows me into the main body of the house.

A hanging picture of the couple smiling while sitting at a campfire catches my attention. They have a youthful spark to their smiles, something beautiful that shouldn’t have been extinguished so soon.

The stench directs me straight to the first body in the living room. I rub my temple to hide my discomfort at the sight before me. I can tolerate the death of a villain, but the death of an innocent always tarnishes the soul.

“What do the human police think happened here?” I ask as I squat down next to the man. He is on his stomach, abandoned thoughtlessly on the ground after being fed on. The bite mark indicates that he was bitten from behind. This man was discarded like an unwanted candy wrapper.

“They aren’t sure. That’s why I was contacted. We manage the local parks and wildlife. It’s how we get unfettered access when the pack needs to go on a run.” Alpha Berrick squats beside me and gently moves the man’s head so he can point at the wound. “We are trying to convince them that it was an animal attack. There isn’t much that could do this at this time of year. Luckily, the humans here are happier in their ignorance than considering there is something worse out there.”

“From those marks, it can only be a vampire. They made a mess of this man. It didn’t need to be like this.” Standing, I inspect the space for any obvious clues to the culprits behind this attack.

The house is lived in but tidy. I note the beer bottles on the table and three packets of open corn chips with accompanying dips. They were hosting a small gathering or watching a sports match on tv. I make a note to come back to that idea. It could be how the vampires made it into the house. It's an easy trick, meet someone out, pretend to share an interest, and then join them back at their accommodation so you can enjoy it more. Sport is always an easy in with potential victims.

"Alpha, can your wolves please roll him over?" I ask. Alpha Berrick points at two wolves who carefully roll the man onto his back.

"Was there a medieval festival? Or did they attend a costume party over the weekend?" I ask the alpha in confusion at the ill-fitting tailored suit the man is wearing. The cut is not what is considered common now. The frilled blouse is the biggest tell that this outfit is from another period.

He shakes his head, confused. "Huh, I haven't paid any attention to their clothes." He bends to examine the attire. A small frown forms at the oddity of the man's clothing. Another wolf lurking draws closer, not able to stave off the curiosity. "They were more outdoorsy folks. Fishing, hunting, and camping. No one in these areas is wearing anything like this."

"Strange," I say slowly as I get a better view of the bite. "There isn't much blood on the floor. The vampire likely drained him to death before tearing his throat out."

"Are you implying this was a compassionate death?" one of the other wolves in the house asks in disbelief.

Compassion? Definitely not. Something about this implies a different feeling. Regret or sympathy would be better terms to use. If those were the driving force, why kill this male?

"Show me the woman," I demand as dread gnaws at my gut.

This isn't something that I would usually be sent to. The wolf alpha was right when he said they usually send like to attend like. And me? I am who you send when there are no returns for a supernatural. I am given a name and their coordinates, and then the chase begins. Me attending a vampire attack, albeit vicious, is out of the ordinary. I wish I had asked Greta who requested that I attend this murder scene.

"Are you coming?" Alpha Berrick asks as he pauses at a hall leading away from the lounge area.

"Yes." I push the emotion aside and refocus on finding the despicable creatures who did this.

I’m taken to the back of the house, past portraits of the couple. I spend too long viewing each one. It was clear that they were happy. When I have the answers to this tragedy, I’ll allow myself to experience the loss of the waste of their lives.

My feet stall on the shaggy cream carpet as I enter the room. Unlike the man, the woman is lying on her back. She was not dropped carelessly like the man but was tucked carefully under the sheets. There is no regret in this scene. This was a considered attack. A scene that needs to be poked at one layer at a time.

“She’s been staged. Whoever did this wanted her to be found this way,” I mumble to myself. I understand how the wolves got the impression that the woman was abused before her death. She has been stripped down to some kind of nightgown-undergarment. Her hands are gently positioned on her stomach with her head tilted so slightly that you’d assume she was sleeping. The bites covering her neck turn this perfect picture into a nightmare.

I count five separate bites from my position at the door, and that’s not considering what is hiding on the other side of her body.

Without taking my eyes off her, I reach into my backpack and grab my phone. I press number three, so it calls one of the pre-programmed numbers.

“What do we have?” Abraham Van Helsing asks, and like always, he skips the pleasantries. He was always an abrupt man, but as he aged beyond his intended years, the personality quirk solidified into his reputation as a man never to be messed with. It helps that he can back up his attitude with his physical ones.

“Abe, it’s brutal. This was no accident committed by an over-eager drinker. This was someone, or a group, who wanted to revel in the deaths they inflicted on these humans. The staging of the deaths is becoming more disturbing than the deaths themselves.” I wrack my brain for any recognition of ever crossing paths with vampires who would do this. “The woman was practically mauled to death. The man had his throat torn out.”

“Did she just call Van Helsing Abe?” someone asks behind me.

I ignore them. “The man was found in the lounge room, face down. I can’t tell you anything other than this vicious attack, but the maiming of the male’s body was committed after he was completely drained.”

“Not much blood?” Abraham asks.

“Barely a drop marking up the floor around the body,” I say. “His throat being torn out doesn’t make any sense.”

“Any clues about who would do this?” Abraham poses before continuing. “No vampire of a decent vintage is registered living in the area. I checked the location of the closest vampire nest, and it is hours away. They are registered to their local Vampire House. According to the records, they are careful and law-abiding,” Abe informs me. Leather sighs as he moves around on the couch that’s in his home office. “Anything else?”

Abraham is quiet when I tell him about the oddity of the man’s clothing, not having an opinion about the information.

“I'm going to inspect the woman now.” I force my feet to join the Alpha standing at the base of the bed.

“Get on with it,” Abe says. “I want you back here as soon as possible.” There is a touch of something in his voice that takes me several seconds to recognize. Concern. That’s the undercurrent of his tone that I detect.

In all our years of working together, he’s never been worried about me taking a case. No matter how gritty the situation is. So why the concern now?

I do my best to hide my stunned reaction to Abraham from the wolves though I’m sure they can detect a change in my scent.

“Mina?” Abe calls. I ignore him as I move to the side of the bed. Her pose is peaceful, which makes the bites on her neck all the more sinister.

“This couple is a message.” The phone slips from my fingers as I am robbed of the ability to speak.

The thud my phone makes as it slaps the floor causes the hairs to rise on the back of my neck.

Alpha Berrick tentatively steps forward and scoops the phone off the floor before holding it to his ear. He introduces himself to Abe and then waits silently for further instruction.

The bed is soaked in blood. She wasn’t bitten to be fed on like the man was. She was slowly drained of her blood. The undergarment that should be white varies now in shades of red to little pink. It’s not the gore rendering me speechless but the attire. It has a simple yet elegant lace trim, the kind that was imported from Paris. Or in my case, my father brought me the lace as a gift. A tailor of the highest reputation was commissioned to

design and sew six sets of undergarments, all trimmed in the expensive lace. The first time I wore the under clothing was on my wedding night. The gowns were beautiful, and they hid the treasure beneath I had saved only for my husband. They were long and would be considered conservative by today's standards.

I brushed the woman's hair away from her neck and gingerly stroked the worn lace around the decolletage.

"It's just as beautiful as I remember it," I say. A small smile captures my lips at forgotten memories. The life I had before I became irrevocably changed.

"Beautiful?" Alpha Berrick snarls. "That word has no place in this house after what happened to these humans."

The wolf's words douse me with icy water. My husband's bashful expression as he cups my chin and mutters sweet nothings is torn away as the plug is pulled on the void he filled, and back is the whirlpool of blank emptiness.

I glance around the room, collecting my bearings, meeting the eyes of each hovering wolf before directing my attention back to the dead body in my dress.

"Oh god! The initials!" I step back as my eyes fall to the WH stitched daintily above her left breast.

"Wilhelmina Harker," I say, pointing to the letters. "That's what the WH stands for." I clear my throat. "But how?" I whisper half the question because if I finish the thought, everything I once knew to be true will be a lie.

Everything comes together like an electric bolt to the side of my temple.

I run at full vampiric speed back to the male body.

"You are a message," I repeat as I stare down at him. This time I am more confident in the situation now that I have my bearings. The suit is a dagger to my heart because I should have recognized it immediately. The jacket has a leather lapel in the same style as my Jonathan liked to wear. He was always a stylish man, even as he complained that he had no time to waste on such frivolities. I stop that memory from sucking me back in and focus on the events unfurling before me.

I open the jacket and find matching initials, JH, on the suit's inner lining.

“What’s going on? You will put Mina back on the phone with me right now,” Abraham is screaming as the alpha rushes into the living room with the phone. His wolf is present in his eyes, edgy and searching for the threat.

“Who is this man?” I ask Alpha Berrick. “Who the damning hell is this couple? And why were they so important to him?” My fangs slice through my gums. Strong emotions always have our inner demons wanting to surface. With this revelation, I couldn’t stop my vampiric side from emerging, even if I wanted to.

The alpha tenses as the other wolves flank him, preparing for orders.

“What is going on?” Abe yells to end our standoff.

“Alpha?” I hiss at him. “I won’t ask again.”

“Blain,” he responds, not wavering from his position. “His name is Jonathan Blain.”

“Jonathan,” I exhale. I don’t register when my fist smashes through the floor or how much of the wood I tear up. The pain of the splinters cutting up my knuckles can’t compete with the despair ripping me apart. The alpha forces his wolves away from me.

Jonathan Blain. Wilhelmina Crescent. The clothes. Relics from the past.

This is the message. The only wrongs committed by this couple were ones of ignorant coincidence.

“Who sent me here?” I ask, grabbing the phone from the Alpha.

“I received a call today requesting that you attend this place. It didn’t come through the normal channels from the Council.”

“This is a message, Abraham.” I wipe my face with my spare hand. “But I don’t understand. He’s dead. He’s meant to be dead,” I say, sinking to my knees and resting my head on the beautiful clothing. I try to recall the smells of the original owner, but my nose doesn’t catch anything other than death. With the smells robbed of me, I move to the memories of how the material pulled on his body as he moved through life. As he laughed. His muscles under my secret touches. Those memories are corrupted by the body in these clothes. This man is a poor imposter compared to the original owner of these remarkable clothes.

How much time has passed since we were together? Memories that were meant to be cement and part of my core being had somehow crumbled

into sand. Each grain slips away, chipping away at the Mina I grew to be. The Mina, who became a member of the Guard, is an empty shell, a vessel to be filled with the will of those strong enough to wield her. I had no idea how far I'd fallen from my beginnings until I stared down at a piece of it.

Something rustles under my touch. Blindly, I slip my hand into the breast pocket and retrieve a perfect square of paper. "You assured me that he was dead. Executed by the Council for his crimes."

"Who are you talking about, Mina?" Abraham dares to ask, barely above a whisper.

Slowly I unfold the note. My fingers guide the lines my eyes draw over each word. Each letter.

Abraham knows exactly what I am talking about. He knows because he must be part of it.

"You told me he is dead," I say, faking a calm that only a cell phone can hide from the man on the other side.

Alpha Berrick catches my attention as he frantically instructs his wolves to leave the room. "I want it on the record that whatever is happening isn't our business. Our pack will not get involved in political feuds."

My hand swats in the wolf's direction, hoping to shut him up so I can focus all my attention on the man on the other side of the phone.

"How do you know…Why do you say that?" Abraham Van Helsing whispers, not daring to say the truth aloud.

"Because there is a dead body dressed in Jonathan's suit. The woman is wearing one of my nightgowns." I choke on the bile that's burning my throat. "It's a nightgown from when I was a wife."

"No, it can't be," Abraham Van Helsing cuts himself off. I want to yell at him to sit still because his leather couch once sounded like comfort. Home. Now it screams betrayal as it suffers under the Immortal man's weight.

"And," I cut him off. "He left me a clue. Well… it's a damn sledgehammer to the skull." I read the note again, memorising each word.

My dearest Wilhelmina,
I'll be seeing you soon.
Best, Dracula.

20 years later

Chapter 2

August

I curse the noise that wakes me up. When I finally register that it's my phone, I groan since there will be no more sleep tonight. Rolling over, I pick up the device and grumble at Abraham Van Helsing’s name as it lights up the screen. "What does he want?"

I am supposed to be unavailable. Even my on-call shifts were to be reassigned to someone else. That was my reward for finally solving the case of the stray vampires who were terrorising the Rockies. Hikers constantly going missing is a fantastic way to draw attention to a group of creatures who are only meant to exist in fantasy books and on bad television.

"I was sleeping," I grumble into the phone once I've collected it from under my pillow.

"August, there is a situation, and you're the person I need on it," VH says with no pause. From his tone, he was woken from sleep as well. The engine humming in the background makes it clear he is already heading into the office. This must be serious.

I pull the phone away from my ear to check the time.

One-twenty-five am. I've only been asleep for an hour.

"And my time off?" I ask, sitting up.

"Your situation with the Guard is…. Different. If you want real time off, you're going to have to change your identity and hide." I detect banter in his tone, but it doesn't stop me from gritting my teeth at the trap I am in.

"What do you need?" I growl.

He doesn't respond immediately, a common VH tactic for reminding someone who the power is on the other end of the line. Abraham Van Helsing is not a man I want to be on the wrong side of. Although he is not a person I want to be good bedfellows with, either.

I run my fingers through my hair and sigh. "I need forty minutes, then I'll be at headquarters for orders."

His continued silence is disconcerting and has me checking that my phone hasn't disconnected.

"Don't come in," he finally says.

"VH?" I shift to the edge of the bed, my elbows resting on my knees.

Another pause. This time it's accompanied by a weighted breath. The man who prides himself on his control has exposed a weakness.

"I need you to collect someone before attending the scene."

"You're being cryptic and very unlike yourself right now. What's going on, VH?"

His indicator ticks three times before the engine is turned off.

"There is a person who is needed to assist with the situation." Another damn pause that's turning my concern back to frustration. "Mina Harker."

The request steals the breath from my lungs. "This must be some situation if you need me to collect the lady in red. The one hooded with her red magic." The first and only of that title. Not that any other woman was willing to follow in her footsteps. There will only ever be one Mina Harker.

"You will correct your tone, August Andino. Her name is Mina Harker of the Supernatural Guard," VH snaps, reminding me where his loyalties lie. She has been gone for decades, yet he still cherishes the woman, who, from rumours, would love to see his entrails mounted as a trophy.

"You, of all people, should know I would never disrespect *her*," I growl at him. I put the phone on speaker and get to my feet.

Mina Harker was the name that could terrify the hardest of the immortals before a case involving the death of two humans threw her to the depth of her sanity. Those who doubt her say she is now wallowing in the darkest recesses of hellish corners of the supernatural world. Rumours that I struggle to believe if they are talking about the woman I once met.

"Yes," VH agrees, "That's why I need you to go. I won't send anyone else."

So, he does remember my brief history with her.

"What time is she expecting my arrival?" I ask as I slip an undershirt over my head before grabbing a button-up off a hanger.

"She won’t be aware you're coming," VH replies. The silence in his background erupts into a maddening chatter. He must be entering the office.

My fingers fumble with a button as I gape, horrified, at the glowing phone screen. I must have made a frustrated noise because the man who never justifies anything volunteers information. "Mina and I have a complicated history. Because of that *history*, she won't take my call. I need you to convince her to come in. August, I need her for this."

I would feel sorry for the man due to the unprecedented levels of guilt he must be carrying. However, the clincher I was waiting for is revealed in a stunning hand. VH usually tries to hide his manipulations better than this.

"It's a futile mission." I maintain my cool as years of suppressed history push their way to the surface. "You're sending a damaged werewolf into the den of an infamous wolf hunter."

"Your history is why I am sending you," VH says while not denying my claim about this being pointless. "I am sending you because you are the only one who will take her as a threat seriously. Mina is, and will always be, Mina. The puritan on the outside and corrupted on the inside."

"That doesn't tell me a damn thing about her. I need more than vague statements if I am going to retrieve her," I growl as the man chuckles at my bite.

There isn't anything from the Guard archives that I haven’t read about Ms Harker. We met once over a century ago. It was brief, barely an encounter, yet she changed my life. By the time I was ready to join the Supernatural Guard, she had disappeared like the shadows she was famous for. No one had heard from her for years. Or so I had thought.

"You're going to owe me, VH. I mean it. I don't like being part of your games."

"Agreed." He said that far too quickly to ease any discomfort.

"How do you know where she is?" I ask, searching my drawers for pants.

"She reappeared seven years ago. Since then, I have been keeping an eye on her."

In other words, he's been spying on the woman. I have a hundred more questions I want to ask, but I want to be done with this call more than giving in to curiosity.

"Send me her location, VH. I'm not guaranteeing I will bring her. I am agreeing to make the offer for her assistance with this case, then I am tucking my tail between my legs and getting out of the firing line."

"I accept the compromise even though you are pushing a lot of boundaries tonight, August. Usually, you're more pliant than this."

I growl at him, preparing to hang up when he speaks again.

"I'll provide you with something that she won't be able to refuse."

I shake my head because it always comes back to tricks and manipulations.

"Inform Mina that Jack Griffin has come back." VH chuckles. "That will get her attention."

"Griffin?" I ask, searching my memories for any recognition of the name. This time I do stumble as I reach for the phone. "The God-damn Invisible Man?" A fable. They are a special breed of supernatural, a hybrid supernatural that is considered a mistake in our world.

"The very one." VH talks like it’s normal to encounter someone with such a reputation.

"One fable hunting another? That's what this is about. And this is the will of the Council?" I ask as the mess I'm walking into becomes a fucking tyre fire.

"The Council agreed to this. They've wanted Mina back in the fold for years, and Griffin has now presented the perfect situation to approach her. Griffin's an old friend and adversary of hers. She won't be able to resist coming for him." There is an unfamiliar tension in his voice. "Once you have contacted Mina, I'll message you the address of the crime scene."

He hangs up, leaving me staring at the blank screen. I finish buttoning my black denim jeans, grab my boots from the stand at the front door and leave with my satchel in hand. As I tie my boots on the driver's seat, my phone pings with the location of her residence.

"That's two-fucking hours away," I grumble when I open my maps.

If I manage the impossible task of getting her to come with me, I'm then going to have to spend hours with her in a confined space.

Opening my glove box, I use the spray I keep there for emergencies, making sure to use a little more than I need. Unlike werewolves, a vampire's sense of smell isn't strong, but the more I mess with her senses, the more chances I have of escaping this encounter with my throat intact. I may admire her, but I am not a fool to believe she will be as eager to host me, let alone hear my plea for her return.

With the car making decent time on the freeway, I destroy the silence by cranking the music and pushing the thoughts on my destination

out of my mind. Unlike many, I have never been burdened by my own company. For centuries I was all I ever had. Music has always been the companion of my lonely mind, a habit I'll never break. Every soul needs a warm meal.

"Fables," I say in disbelief of the supernaturals who somehow broke the laws of our existence and became crossbreeds of different streams of magic. They tend to stay away from the common society and keep to themselves.

Mina Harker is one of those beings. A shadow mage who survived the vampiric turning to become a crossbreed. The one and only of her kind. The attempted turning should have killed her, but like all fables, whether magic or fate, something kept her alive. Griffin has a similar story: an immortal experimented on and somehow infused with the abilities of an illusion mage. And like Mina, he became something never seen before or since. These supernaturals are the glitches of our world and unintentionally work against the fabrics that hold our society in line. Anyone who willingly or unwillingly works against the Council, and the law-enforcing Families who back them, will never be free from political interference.

And for those of us who want a peaceful existence? We stay as far away from these anomalies as possible.

My phone notifies me that I am approaching my destination. I slow until I'm idling on the side of the road staring at the rows of houses.

This can't be it?

I scout the street and finally land on the home of the woman I'm here for. Like everything on this street, it's a modern house, not in a monstrous way but in a classic way. The garden is a concrete drive with black stones breaking up sections to lead to the large black front door. No grass for the undead since they cannot mow it in the middle of the night without raising suspicion or ire from neighbours.

Supernaturals tend to stick to styles, trends and behaviours that match the period they were born and raised in. That usually goes for the architecture that reminds them of their childhoods or human lives. If this house represents a vampire, they would have only been turned this last decade. It's not a perfect science to measure the age of an unknown supernatural, but a tool to size up my opponent when observing what trends they wrap themselves in.

From what I have learnt of Mina’s character, this place is all wrong for her. It's a carbon copy of all the other houses lining the streets. It's completely unremarkable and undistinguished from the other building lining the street. How much has she changed in these years of self-imposed exile for her to willingly partake in this scene?

"Here goes nothing," I mumble as my seat belt clicks under my fingers. With my amplified hearing, I catch the humming from the nocturnal creatures scavenging what is left of the darkness. There are no revving of exited humans taking their cars out for a spin or music blaring from pubs and bars. The air is as stagnant as the atmosphere of the street – suburban and ordinary.

Knowing whose door I’m about to knock on, this scene is as misleading and dishonest as an oasis in the desert.

As I reach the door, it swings open alarmingly fast. My instincts tell me to freeze and wait for the inevitable attack.

"You're not the pizza guy," a female tells me with sassy hands on her hips. Her statement is so surprising that I dare to look around to find the other person she could be speaking to.

Her strawberry-blonde hair is cropped tight to her shoulders. The sprinkling of freckles matches the different flecks in her brown eyes.

She licks her lips in a practised motion. The slight flare of her nostrils tells me she is trying to figure out what, not who, I am.

I copy her action and let her scent corrupt my nose.

"Vampire?" I ask, not believing my nose. I have never been wrong, but there is always a chance of a first when forever is your future. It's a conflict of the senses because my eyes tell me one thing and my nose another.

Vampires have strict rules about what age a person can be turned. No human is to be turned before the age of twenty-four. So, this little female has either been touched with the gift of a youthful face, or she breaches one of the more critical vampire rules. Rules, from my knowledge, lead to the death of the child vampire and the monster who changed them.

"Wolf," she replies with a petulant eye roll. "We don't want whatever you are selling. We are well established in this area and will not be moving so your pack can expand its territory." She lists these points on her fingers like she knows why I'm here. "And if you don't have my pizza,

then…" She shrugs before attempting to slam the door in my face. My strategically placed foot has her frowning as the door remains open.

"You play a dangerous game, Mr Wolf," she says. Her face darkens, and somehow, the air around us becomes static. "I am known to enjoy a bit of danger, just not on my doorstep."

It's strange to meet such an intense power in such a weak-looking package.

"I'm looking for Mina Harker," I reply quickly. "Does she… Is she here?" The female crosses her arms and causally leans on the door frame. All the energy she was throwing around seconds ago vanishes.

Her eyes follow her hair as it flies over her shoulder to acknowledge the footsteps echoing behind her. A sinister smirk crosses her features.

"Now, why would a werewolf want the lady in red? Maybe he doesn't cherish his life," a male voice says.

The female swings the door open to expose a young man with narrowed eyes and a wry grin. The male is perched, exactly like his counterpart, against a wall further from the entryway. This man is oozing with delinquent energy like he's never had a care in the world. He, too, is touched with an unnatural youth. His cheeks, like hers, are rosy, and his eyes are giddy with unfettered excitement. None of us who have lived this long are touched with such enthusiasm, yet here is proof that I am not always right because this male smells like a creature who is as old as dirt. They both do.

The male and female are wearing matching tie-dye tracksuit sets, reinforcing my thought that they must be related by blood. Real siblings, the kind that shared at least one parent.

"Am I at the right house? Van Helsing didn't mention other vampires would be here. I need to find Ms Harker."

At the mention of Van Helsing, they both hiss with fangs on display as they jerk upright from their relaxed postures. The male comes to stand by the female.

"We don't say that name here!" the female hisses as the male wraps an arm around her shoulders. Her head rests in the crook of his neck like that spot was made for her. Their matching red hair blends together, practically morphing them into one being.

"You'd be smart and follow our lead," the boy adds. "Never say that name in any area she is known to inhabit."

My head slowly moves up and down, in some resemblance of agreement. What else can I do when creepy teenagers give me instructions with such intensity?

"What's taken so long?" a melodic voice echoes through the house. "I've cued the episode, so it's ready to start. Greta, did you get your pizza?"

"Coming! Don't get your panties in a wad," the female who must be Greta replies with an indulgent grin. That grin sours when she glances back at me. "Are you coming in or not? I don't have all day for you to decide whether you will grow a pair of big hairy balls or if you're going to belly crawl back to your car."

The boy chuckles as he stares at my groin. "I don't know, sis. From the outline in his jeans, the man is hung quite nicely. Those jeans are *very* flattering."

Blushing is not something I can recall ever doing. This boy's comments are the closest I've ever been to experiencing the touches of red on my face.

Greta huffs as she marches off. The boy performs one more assessment with his wandering eyes before following her.

My curiosity has me following the young vampires deeper into the house. The door handle passes through my fingers as the weight of the heavy wood causes the door to secure itself. A little tap on the door with my knuckle tells me the wood is wrapped around a durable steel frame. A bolt is activated when the door is latched shut, locking me inside.

I try to absorb all the house's unique features but can't stop my mind from reeling at what is happening. A red light flashes as I pass under it. I'm not too confident with this technology, but I'm certain it's either a sensor or a camera. Neither gives me comfort. I scout the windows, ensuring I have a few escape routes when this meeting inevitably turns south. They are draped with lush material, but the glistening of metal around the frame on a second inspection has my feet stalling.

"Stutters on the windows…" I mumble. It's common for a vampire to be overly cautious of the sunlight entering the sleeping area. These window accessories are overkill. It's the kind of protection you'd need to prevent some kind of invasion.

This place is not a home. It's a bunker.

"This way," Greta says, swinging open a door with stairs leading beneath the house.

A basement.

Chapter 3

August

I must be getting foolish in my old age for not batting an eye. I take an extra moment to inhale deeply to scent what could be down there. Greta giggles like she finds my behaviour endearing and not a sign of mistrust. There are no threatening scents, just some hits of artificial lavender and something woodier that makes me want to sneeze. Realising it's not a dank, concrete stairway to hell, but a swanky carpeted staircase curving softly down to the basement area, I follow Greta, and the boy takes up the rear after I take my first step.

The lavender becomes more potent with each step, messing with my nose completely. The stairs round out to expose a hall with a crisp cream carpet and a mixture of art hanging. It's like an elegant modern apartment without skyscraper-facing windows. Or like an art gallery.

There is a bathroom behind a partially open door. It glistens with floor-to-ceiling white tiles. On the opposite side of the hall is a bedroom covered in white, from the drapes to the bedspread.

How is this the home of a vampire? Where are the dark colours and easy-to-clean fabrics?

Greta leads me to a room at the end of the hallway before moving to a bar cart parked in the corner.

The back of a head peeks over the top of a dusty pink recliner. The hair is so dark it shimmers with a subtle blue underneath. The slightest movement of her neck as it cants to the side tells me that my presence has been noticed.

"What have you brought me, Greta? I didn't know you were having a guest join us for the show." Her voice is husky with a hint of sugar, and it has my pulse wanting to spike, but I manage to stay calm. Her head turns to the side, allowing me to witness her tongue peek out from behind her lips as she lightly tastes them. Setting off a room of vampires is the last thing I want to do.

I clear my throat and step forward. "Ms Harker, I have been sent here by a name I've been told not to say around you. I will not be deceitful in my task, though." The woman turns to me, with glistening blue eyes batting up at me. VH's words fly through my mind about how she is innocent yet corrupted. I have never truly trusted the man, so I disregard that impression and build one of my own. "Van Helsing has sent me to speak with you. He would like you to consult on a new case for the Guard." The words spew from me without so much as a pause. I've never been accused of being someone with too much to say, let alone someone who suffers from word vomit.

"Is that so?" Her fingers slide through her long black tresses. When they snag on a knot, she gives it her full attention as she turns away from me. "Errand boys are getting more attractive. Don't you think, Johannes?" The boy hums his agreement from behind me.

"Erm…" I turn to face the other two vampires in the room. They ignore me as they open bottles and start mixing different combinations of coloured drinks. Alcoholic drinks.

"Um, should you be drinking those… aren't you like…"

Everyone in the room laughs at my comment, which, of course, is ludicrous. Being around immortal children is baffling and has clogged any helpful thought processing.

"You spend too much time with humans. Or have you forgotten since our thrilling introduction way back at the front door that we aren't humans? Vampires don't have a *legal* drinking age, silly werewolf," Greta says.

"We are probably older than you, wolf," the boy adds, coming out from behind the bar with something green and smelling like lemon and watermelon. The female follows with two more of the same drink. She passes one off to Mina before finding a seat. With her phone, Mina thumbs a few buttons, then the opening credits roll for a TV show I don't know.

"Are you going to continue standing there like a massive creeper, or are you going to sit down and watch the show?" Greta asks as she peers over the couch at me with a quirked brow.

"Yeah, either sit down and shut up or fuck off. I've been dying to watch this for months. She wouldn't let us before all episodes were released." The male points an accusing finger at Mina, who confronts the accusation with a droll expression.

"House of Dragon," Mina mumbles as the credits cut away and harrowing narration starts. "I love me some dragons! Our world would be so much cooler if dragons were real." The most terrifying hunter of our kind sighs wistfully in my presence, making me question again if I am in the right place. The other plausible explanation is that my vehicle careened off the road and I'm in the afterlife – one that doesn't seem built for me.

Could this be an illusion? She was once considered a powerful mage. This may be a trap of some kind.

My thumbnail presses painfully into the side of my finger while I also take a deep breath to find anything amiss.

If this is not an illusion, then their bananas have been in the bowel for too long.

Both teens murmur their agreement with the dragon sentiment, turning the sweet comment into a menacing one.

I stare at my phone, hoping it will provide me with answers for handling this situation. I would be more comfortable if Mina summoned her magic and threatened me than joining them in this very human-like experience. I understand the art of warfare and politics... This? Being in someone's polite company is as foreign as moving to Mars.

I step toward the couch, change my mind, and take two steps away. Doubt is a useless emotion. Whoever designed it thought we needed to maintain self-perseveration.

Do we step out of the safety our shelter provides? No.

We are taught to look left, then right, then left again before crossing a road, no matter how empty it is.

For me, doubt has only brought weakness because if I hesitate, it will mean I am dead or, worse, bound in a cage.

This was never going to be a successful mission. It's now my sense of determination and sick fascination with this mess that keeps me cemented here.

I shake my head. A new tact is needed, so I focus on the situation with the Invisible Man and not play house with the lady in red.

"Sit down, wolf. You're pissing me off," Mina snaps, making me change my mind and decide that playing house is an acceptable option right now. I scurry back with my tail between my legs like a damn pup. I perch on the edge of the couch, focusing on the screen like a good boy. If

someone scratches me behind my ears, it will confirm my suspicions that I have made it to the enteral depths of hell.

After the second episode of the dragon show, Mina turns off the television, unfurling like a cat until she stands with her arms stretching over her head. I finally got my opportunity to take her in. She's also wearing a tracksuit that matches the others. Even still, every curve and every angle are defined with the movement of her wringing out her muscles.

She is as remarkable as the rumours. There is a sweetness to her. The way her blue eyes are a little too large, and her nose has this slight tilt. The gentle sway to her midnight-blue ponytail. But it's the mole sitting above her lip. It's a delicious honeytrap. If you so much as glance at it, it means you've already been consumed.

I am so low on her list of priorities that she pays me no regard whatsoever, bending to the side with her hands resting on her hips.

"You two, get out of here and prepare for the day rest." When the young vampires just stare at her, Mina adds, "The sun will be joining us shortly." The words are innocuous, but they are full of demand.

The young vampires nod as they collect their mess from the pizza that did arrive halfway through the first episode. Mina didn't touch the pizza. She did manage to eat a whole packet of a sweet pink treat. Nothing was offered to me, not that I would have accepted. It would have brought me too far into the delusion they are living in.

"Vampires don't need food." The words leave my mouth without my consent. I don't know what's wrong with me. I’m stating facts like I’m role-playing Google.

"This wolf is a *real* genius," the male, Johannes, says, throwing a thumb in my direction. "It's great to know that the Guards have high standards for who they accept now." Johannes picks up three empty bottles of Red-Eye and leaves with them clinking in his fingers.

Greta giggles as she bats her brown eyes at me. "Little wolf, vampires need blood to live. We can still eat, silly. Food won’t do anything except tantalise the taste buds." She skips to the door holding her pizza box. "Goodnight, my love," she says, smiling softly at Mina, who nods in acknowledgement of the sweet words. Greta glances at me with a scrunched nose before leaving me with the person I came to talk to.

Mina's stance sharpens, making a shiver run down my spine, leaving me feeling like the weaker creature in this house. It's not something I have experienced since I was a pup. Even in the long years before I was a Guard, I've always contained more power than the others around us due to my age and dominance. It was just that those who controlled me wouldn't ever let me harness it.

With Mina, I know I'd struggle in a fight because there is something scrappy about her. Even if I managed to win, I'd also lose something in the victory as well.

The creepy young vampires... I don't have a chance of winning anything against them with their age and experience. It's an evocative thought, though. It's been a long time since someone made me feel the burden of mortality.

It's just Mina and I left in the room. The time has arrived to finally converse with the woman I came for.

The wolf and the hunter.

And now I don't know where to begin.

We stare at each other. I don't know what story my face is telling, but she keeps hers impossibly blank.

"I'm going to bed," she says with no expression. No indication of how she will respond to my request or my presence in her home. Nothing.

I'm on my feet, trying to produce something to say that will make her stay. Mina doesn't pause as she walks by me and towards the stairs.

"That's it?" I say, exasperated and frustrated by my lack of sleep. Dealing with VH. The two-hour drive here. Watching some fantasy TV show with creepy vampire children.

And she's unwilling to give me an inch by listening to what I came here to say.

"I've sat here waiting to speak to you. Now, you're going to bed." They are not the words of a genius riddler, but it's what spills out of my mouth.

"The sun is pulling me to sleep. I can only stay up so long, werewolf. Such is the life of a vampire." She shrugs as she continues up the stairs.

"What about the case? Aren't you the least bit curious about why I was told to come here?"

Another shrug as her feet continue to climb the steps.

"Griffin has come back." I finally play the card that I should have used hours ago. I had hoped she'd carry the same curiosity I'd held for her. That’s a naivety I can now shed. "I was told to tell you that."

Her foot freezes before slowly lowering to the step. I gain on her, staying a few steps down to make sure my proximity doesn't present as threatening.

"I don't know what you know about this situation. Or the Invisible Man. Van Helsing has requested you come back because you are needed." I clear my throat and try one more time. "I've been given this case. I read through the file during the TV show. A human woman was murdered. It has something to do with Jack Griffin. I'm not sure how he is involved yet, but your experience with the Guard and the Invisible Man will be of great advantage to me."

Mina’s unconvinced. Though the hard lines of her face soften, providing me with the hope that I have made a chip in her armour.

"Screw the past and your grudge against VH. Against the Guard. Come out of retirement for one more case."

She shakes her head regretfully. "I left for a reason. Jack Griffin isn't enough to get me to come back."

I don't know what broke this woman, but she half-emerged back into known society after being missing for so long. There must be a reason for that. I try another tack. "After this case, I'll do my best to keep VH from contacting you again. Unless you choose to engage with the Guard."

Mina is so startled by that promise that she forgets to banish the betraying emotion from her face. Regardless of her disbelief at my statement, I meant every word.

"I could disappear again," she fires back.

"You could. But you were securely hidden for a decade. Suddenly you reappear and play on the outskirts of our society. Mina, it doesn't take a genius to know you no longer want or need to hide. So let me help you continue..." I throw out an arm like this basement is her eternal reward. "To continue planning or plotting. Or maybe, you're just surviving. It's not my business," I tack on.

"You have that kind of pull with Abraham Van Helsing?" Now she’s sceptical.

"He took me under his wing and trained me when no one else would. I owe him a debt for that. My work as a Guard Hunter is how I’ve

worked off that debt to him."

"And yet you continue to work for those who rule us all." An accusation.

"It's complicated," I counter, not ready to delve into the complexity of my mere existence.

"So, you're his ally? Team Van Helsing." That comment lets me know how thin the ice is under my boots.

"He is my boss." The raised eyebrow tells me that she doesn't buy that justification. I find it agreeable to add more than I would usually ever reveal. "I am loyal to myself since no one else has ever been loyal to me. I work hard for him, and he respects me for that. If I requested that he leave you to your quiet life, he would seriously consider it."

"Where is your pack? Wolves never work alone," she says with genuine curiosity.

I run a hand down my face because the smells from earlier continue to cling to my nose. "It's complicated. And not something I am willing to discuss."

She gives a slow, considered nod as something lightens in her eyes.

"Whatever mess is about to fall on us, we manage it my way," she says. That spark leaves and is immediately replaced with dread.

"You can do or behave in any way you fancy. And I will do the same," I counter.

Her eyes dart to the ceiling as she considers that compromise.

"Fine. So, we are crystal clear. I don't need your help with Van Helsing or VH, as you so casually call him." She takes another step while keeping me pinned with her stare. Something tells me this is where our paths stay connected, or she turns her back on supernaturals and the Council for good.

Taking the few steps needed to close the distance, she manages to end up in my face even though she is nowhere near my height. "I will never again give my allegiance to anyone, especially a fake bureaucracy trying to enforce the same rules they break. I detest the Council and their little *families*. So, if you expect me to show them loyalty like the rest of the Guard, you should leave me in peace now."

"I can accept that," I say, being mindful to keep my face blank. "Fuck the Families. Fuck the Council."

"Fuck the Council," she echoes. After another slow nod, she purses her lips and makes a pitchy noise. "You can stay here until I wake. There are cameras in every room of this place, including the bathrooms. You will stay out of our quarters during the rest hours. You won't like what happens if you wake us in our day sleep." She smirks like she's enjoying a memory. "When I wake, you can take me … wherever we need to be."

My nose scrunches as the lavender becomes barely tolerable. "Why couldn't I smell the lavender in the sitting room?" I ask, searching for the source of the scent so I can destroy it.

"Simple magic to mix up the senses," Mina shrugs. "If your intentions were to harm me, you'd be smelling sulphur. It's a great way to vet our friends from foes."

I grit my teeth. I've passed some *test* and I am still being put through the damn wringer to get her to do the bare minimum and show up. I swallow my irritation and stay on task. "Will the children be joining us?"

"The children?" she says with a blink of confusion. I break my solid stance when I glance at the last place I saw them before they disappeared into the other areas of the house.

Why is she confused?

Who else could I be referring to. I do not doubt my sanity enough to think they were an apparition.

I baulk at her.

"Oh! The twins?" she cackles in a way that chills my bones. Mina turns and practically skips the rest of the way up the stairs while I follow with a sick fascination.

Once she reaches the top, she spins and nails me again with her glare. "You may want to ask Van Helsing about them. It's a curious thing when he keeps secrets. Don't you think so?"

Back is the laughter which follows her into the belly of the house before the echo of a lock tells me that I am now alone.

I follow a hall at the top of the stairs until I'm in another living space. The dining table becomes my temporary office as I set up my laptop.

I dial VH, and as usual, he answers with no formality, "Speak."

"You asshole, VH."

“Manners, August,” he snaps. “Have you arrived?” he adds with a more measured tone.

“I made it here a while ago. The woman is practically a scrambled egg," I growl.

“You arrived but haven’t left yet? The sun will be up shortly, which means –”

“I am stuck here until at least tomorrow evening. The good news is that she will come with me tomorrow. Though I don’t know what to expect from her when we arrive at the scene.” I pull out one of the dining chairs and fall into it. “I have questions, VH. So many questions.” The files I’ve read about Mina Harker barely seem to scratch the surface of the complex woman I just met, and they definitely don’t mention anything about living with immortal children.

"You have questions," he drawls. There is the slightest hint of a smile in his voice. "I'm guessing you want to know about the twins."

"You're damn right that I want to know about them. Who are they? How are two immortal children still living? Does the Council know about them? What is their relationship to Harker?" The questions roll off my tongue with an unexpected force. A demand.

“They aren’t children. We, in the know, consider them more teenagers or young adults. They aren’t really children per se…”

“I’m not debating with you about their age, VH. They definitely fall under the legal age to be turned into a vampire. For once, give me a straight fucking answer.”

"Did your parents ever tell you the tale of Hansel and Gretel?"

"I’ve heard it," I croak as my throat becomes sandpaper.

"You are now one of a few people who have met them and survived. Congratulations, that’s worth celebrating, August."

Chapter 4

Mina

Day sleeps always end so abruptly. My eyes snap open as my consciousness wakes like no time has passed since I closed them. The conversation with the werewolf is still as fresh in my mind as the stench he has created in my home.

Now, I have to give up on this fantasy we've built and return to the hellish underworld of supernaturals.

"Ugh." I rub my eyes before glaring at the ceiling.

Did he roll around on every carpeted area of the house to create that stench? It will take bottles of my homemade lemon cleaner to freshen up this place. I should have made him sleep outside.

There is no point delaying this punishment, so I roll out of bed a toe on my slippers.

"I guess you're going?" The words are accompanied by a slight gust of air through my bedroom.

"Don't fucking sneak up on me, you shit," I hiss at Johannes. He laughs as he strolls to my window and activates my automatic blinds before propping himself on the windowsill. "It’s a nice night to go out and break your self-imposed solitude."

"I go out," I grumble.

"Yeah, to feed. And to buy musk sticks when you cannot convince us to do that for you. Usually, the blood and candy are done all in one outing." The mischievous male laughs at me, so I pick up the closest thing to me, my phone, and throw it at his head. He plucks it out of the air and throws it back so fast that it slaps me on my forehead.

"Answer my question," he says instead of fearing the glare I shoot at him.

"Yes, I'm going. And before you bother asking, you're staying here."

He stands slowly with red eyes and fangs bared. "I don't like that you're leaving me. Us," he corrects as his head tilts to the side.

"Get over it, brother dearest. You knew they'd eventually come crawling on their knees for her," Greta says as she wanders in and sits on the end of my bed. "Do you think the wolf is meant to be a softener… A snack and some sex to destress you before you return to work?"

I shift my gaze from Johannes and gape at her, horrified at what is coming from her mouth.

“Damn it, Greta. Do you have to be so crass?” Neither Greta nor Johannes pays me any mind because they are silently battling for who will have the final say in whether I stay or leave here with the wolf.

Johannes bares his fangs and hisses, and Greta responds with a petulant eye roll. “You don’t get a say in her actions, brother. Mina has already decided to go with the wolf.”

There is very little these two ageless vampires can agree on. My safety has always been a battleground that neither wins because neither will ever overrule me once my mind is made up.

"Fine,” Johannes huffs before his expression morphs back into his usual playful grin. “Besides, they didn't send any wolf. That is August Andino," Johannes counters. "Also, I hate drinking wolf. There is something I don't like about the taste of the magic in their blood."

"August? The fae hunter?" Greta asks, surprised that she doesn't know something first.

"The very same. In more recent times, he has been working for the Guard. Rumour has it that he is closely aligned with Van Helsing and now does his bidding."

"I didn't expect him to be so… commanding in his statue and his presence," she says.

“I find it fascinating that he’s chosen not to take on the role of alpha and running a pack. Men with his dominance aren’t usually running around at the beck and call of the Guard," Johannes muses.

“Choice is the operative word, brother. I suspect this wolf didn’t have any.”

I ignore them as I strip out of my clothing. Each item becomes breadcrumbs all the way to the bathroom. The shower doesn't give me the privacy I hoped for when they follow me into the bathroom. Greta jumps on the counter while Johannes closes the toilet lid before sitting on it.

"What hanky-panky behaviour drew Griffin out of the cave he was hiding in?" Johannes asks, reclining like he is on a throne. "I always liked

him. He's a relatable guy."

I knew they would watch my interaction with the wolf last night on the cameras.

"Relatable? The man is a murderer and a thief," Greta argues.

"So are we," Johannes counters. “Though we’ve never been ones for creeping our stealing possessions like rodents. Murder… sure. That’s who we are.”

"Semantics, brother. We may accidentally have killed people while feeding. It's been a long time since we have deliberately killed someone."

"How about what Mina did for the Guard. Isn't that murder?"

"Can't I shower in peace?" I ask. I close my eyes and practise an ancient philosophy – they cannot see me if I can't see them.

If only there was a way to do that with their voices.

"Maybe he's tired of retirement," Greta speculates, ignoring my request and redirecting the conversation away from my moral ambiguity. When I’m not draped in red, I’m all shades of grey.

When I grab the shampoo, Greta jumps off the counter and rips it from my hand, practically joining me under the water.

"What are you doing?" I squeak as my hands wrap pathetically around my body to cover myself.

"You don't have time to fluff around with your hair. Get out, get dressed. Get moving." She waves my shampoo bottle in front of my face. "You're not procrastinating on my watch. There are only so many hours in a night. I'm uncomfortable with you squandering them until we know more about this situation. Not only is it mother-fucking Jack Griffin, but you're also being sucked back into the games of politics the Council plays. And let’s not mention Van Helsing’s manipulations. There is no time for hair washing!"

Annoyed, I flip off the water, then yank my towel so hard that the rail flies off the wall. Greta ducks to avoid being hit in the head, but it doesn't stop it from smashing the mirror behind her.

"Testy," Johannes laughs, kicking a shard of glass with his slippers to clear a pathway out.

"Get the fuck out of here," I hiss, even though, as usual, Greta is right. I am procrastinating because I'm trying to figure out how to leave this house because Johannes is also right.

I barely make it to the corner shop without panicking about monsters who should be ghosts.

"Maybe you both should come?" I say quietly as I tie the towel around my body. "It's too soon for me to leave Johannes in such a vulnerable state."

Greta meets me face-to-face, eyes burning with an intensity that's rarely directed at me. "You need to get over this fear. Dracula is out there whether you are working or hiding. Griffin is back. *Griffin*." She yells his name to remind me of who she is referring to. Like I would have already forgotten. "As for my darling, idiot brother. His pain is his own doing. Do not further indulge him and his behaviour."

"Nice, sister. You'll regret those words when I lay on the grass at the next sunrise and wait to be burnt to a crisp. Maybe I will find peace when I am dust floating on the early morning breeze."

Greta blurs toward him. Her perfectly manicured finger ends up in his face. "Don't start your shit, Johannes." Her accent devolves to something from a period before I was part of my father's anatomy. "Don't hold Mina hostage because of your ridiculous behaviour. You only think with that gross thing hanging between your legs." Greta steps back. Flames shoot out of her eyes as they ping-pong between us. Our singed tails curl and hide between our legs. "Am I clear? I'm sick of both of your bullshit."

"Yes," I mumble while Johannes grins like the fool he is.

"Besides," Greta adds, batting away a stray hair from her eyes. "My brother and I aren't allowed to hold positions of power. The Council made sure of that. It didn't matter that we were instrumental in subduing those who fought in the beginning against their rule. We cannot even register as a family and rule a region. Refusing to openly join you is my continued form of a petulant protest," Greta adds as she marches out of the bathroom with a huff.

"Yeah, I'm the immature one." Now, I'm the one pouting.

"Women!" Johannes mutters as he moves back to the window perch. He breathes on the window so he can draw a picture in the mist.

I open my wardrobe and consider the options in front of me. I need something formidable that says, don't mess with the nervous wreck without saying that *I am a nervous wreck*.

It's a lot to ask of an outfit.

"You are acting like I won't be doing all the grunt work behind the scenes," Greta says as she slides past me and flicks through my hangers. "I'll only be a call away. I'll find you answers as you need them." She hums as she grabs a shirt before turning to my drawers and pulling out a pair of pants. "You should wear leather. It will always be a badass look no matter the decade."

Greta tosses the clothing on the decorative armchair in the corner of the room before abandoning me to slump on my bed. She releases a disgruntled whine as she sits up and tries every pillow on my bed. "Why do you always end up with the best pillows?"

"Let me try them," Johannes says, flopping dramatically beside his sister and fluffing a pillow. They bicker about my bedding when they both claim dibs on my favourite pillow.

Ignoring them, I go back to choosing my wardrobe. Leather might have been part of my attire when I used to be a Guard Hunter. Leather jacket, pants, boots. But now? I can't be who I once was.

I am not who I once was.

Moving to this neighbourhood meant I could pretend to be a version of myself that I'd hope one day to be. A homemaker. Playing that role is no longer a stone in my path, so I push aside my activewear and white high-tops. Then I move past the comfortable flowy dresses and land on my lace-up boots, black jeans, and a grey tee-shirt.

Once I'm dressed in my sensible outfit, I take in my appearance in the mirror and cringe at what is reflected back at me. Plain. Unassuming. Ordinary.

Is this what I have become? I was once a feared name, a formidable force. Now, I wouldn't scare a toddler.

"I'm not ready for this," I say as I pull my wet black hair into a low bun, allowing a few pieces to remain free to frame my face.

"You're due to feed tonight," Greta says. "You should have fed last night. You being *you* chose to skip the meal." She smacks Johannes in the head with a pillow before leaving the room and returning shortly with my bag dangling from her finger. "It has everything you need. Except for a fresh human," she says.

"Do we have any blood bags?" I ask, already aware of the answer.

"You know we don't."

"Fine, I'll grab a substitute," I say, slinging the bag over my shoulder.

"Yeah… that's not going to do. It's been weeks since you've had the good stuff. You're due the good stuff, Mina. Your procrastination is backfiring like I always said it would."

"You know why I hate having blood straight from the source," I reply.

"And you know why you need to make sure you have fresh blood," she retorts, not letting me get away with anything. "It keeps you alive," she adds like I don't know that.

"You've been lecturing me about my feeding habits for decades. If I haven't changed yet, there is no point wasting your breath."

"Live long enough, and eventually, I'll be right," she sighs, ignoring my whispered doubt. She joins my reflection in the mirror. "Do you think you will be gone long?"

"If it's the Council pulling a political move, then I won't be away long."

"And if it's not them?" Johannes asks, proving that he is still listening as he stares at the ceiling.

"If Abraham Van Helsing is pulling me back in… I don't know." There is too much history between us that I haven't faced. I will never forgive him for his lies or omissions. Still, he knew the part of me that was alive with my husband. The ignorant youth who was blinded by love and hope for the future I'd build with my family. I don't know if I'll ever be willing to completely turn my back on that part of my history. That's part of my reasoning for keeping my relationship with Abraham on ice and not confronting him like I should.

Greta nods when she reads my expression. She knows I'm not coming back here.

"The deviant and I will pack up this place. This house was fun for my brief retirement, but it's too far from where we need to be. Reality has come calling, and that means we need real estate back in Ashford close to Headquarters."

"I hate the city," Johannes mopes, leaning up on an elbow. "Let's go further into the country. Roving hills. Big skies. Sheep. Cows. Goats…" Greta and I stare at him.

I'm confused by his ramblings. Greta looks ready to shove a stake between her ears.

"Fine! We'll do what you both want to do and move back to the city," he grumbles.

I ignore him, wrap an arm around Greta, and drag her to me. "Speak soon."

Johannes gets up and wraps his arms around us, making me want to weep as the pain of leaving this place, this bubble, becomes a reality. All it takes is one step out of my bedroom door.

My fingers trail the staircase railing to record every mark and memory the three of us have made since living in this piece of paradise. I approach the kitchen to find a figure hunched over a laptop with a coffee at an easy reach.

He is an interesting choice to send. My mind tries to bend into a Van Helsing manipulation to determine why this particular wolf was sent. This man.

He must have started working with the Guard after I left, so he's only been around twenty years in some kind of official capacity. And I don't recall him ever being associated with any of the Council members, new or previous.

Greta was wrong about him being a delicious snack because this man is a three-course meal, and then some with his bulk. This male, August Andino, has a feral taint to his energy that I've rarely encountered when meeting standard supernaturals. It's the kind that can only be developed with age.

"Shall we leave, August Andino, Hunter of the Guard? Though I've heard you have a preference for killing fae." My words surprise him, and the coffee he was reaching for is knocked over, spilling across the stone benchtop, wetting his car keys but, by divine luck, missing the computer.

A clumsy wolf? Or a nervous one…

I grab a dishcloth and wipe up the mess while he sits frozen, with the exception of his deep brown eyes that study my every movement.

The cloth is thrown into the sink for the twins to deal with later. I beeline for the fridge and grab the last of our Red-Eye drinks. I was hoping there were a few more left so I could take them with me, but Greta has a habit of not stocking them when she knows I'm avoiding feeding. My magic

gently swirls around inside me. It's soothing and reassuring while also reminding me to stay focused on the wolf in my kitchen.

I spin to face the wolf who hasn't stopped staring at me. "Why so quiet, wolf?"

"I think we should get moving?" Each word is considered as they pass his lips.

"You think? Where is the certainty and bravado from last night?"

"Bravado?"

"Yeah, big promises. Big enticements. Big scary fables. Where's that confidence now?"

"I'm not sure… Are you ready to leave? I have information for you to review, and that can be done in our long drive back toward Ashford," August replies. Something about his cautions today has me annoyed. His bluster and nervous tics were boarding on adorable this morning. Something has given him further pause, and his curiosity has turned to dread.

How disappointing.

I ignore him and let my hands soak up the cool, smooth texture of my grey bench top as I enjoy sipping my drink. It took me weeks to choose the right slab of stone to complement the colour of the cupboards. Weeks of stress and decision but none of it really matters in the scheme of time. Things come and go. This is another piece of my history I am leaving behind. For luck, I knock on the bench as I whisper my goodbye.

"Okay, I'm ready," I say once I've discarded the empty Red-Eye bottle and finally return my attention to the wolf in the room.

Damn, why is he still staring at me like that?

"Okay… we should…" He throws a thumb over his shoulder that points to the back of the house. I'm not opposed to following the direction of the thumb because it leads exactly opposite to Ashford, and where I have to spend time contemplating the death of a woman.

"You're a frightened little bird, aren't ya, big guy," I chuckle. "Not even a good evening for the vampire/mage hybrid you are corralling into work. Manners are truly a thing of the past," I sigh playfully.

August lets out a breath. The tension he carries moves from his shoulders to his hands as they curl against the bench. "Good evening, Mina," August says slowly. His hands flex slightly before they disappear from sight. He clears his throat and tries again to speak. "I hope your rest

was what you needed. I'd like to get moving if you would find that acceptable."

My fingers snag his car keys from the counter before twirling them in the air.

"I'm driving," I chirp, with that fake it until you make it pep to my voice.

The damn wolf recovers his confidence far too quickly as he cocks an amused brow at me before patiently holding out his hand. The keys slip off my finger and tumble into his palm as I shrug in defeat.

"I'm driving." He says it like that fact is obvious.

I don't look back as I strut to the front door. Greta once told me about power poses and how they can manipulate the mind into feeling confident. So, I’m power-posing the hell of my exit from my home. I must be doing it right because there is cursing and scrambling as the wolf rushes to follow me.

Chapter 5

Mina

I exit my home and wave at my neighbour over the road as they pull into their driveway. My hand continues its social behaviour while my eyes scout the street for anything out of place. Apart from the Robertsons next door, who forgot to take their bins *again*, everything is normal on my quiet street.

I don't look back as I walk to the non-descript black SUV parked curbside since this house is now part of the past, and the past is always dangerous to linger in.

"You are not what I expected," August says after he has completed his analysis of the neighbourly interaction.

"What were you expecting? My warrior princess days are long behind me. I'm now into what Greta calls my Stepford phase." I hope he understands the reference because I'm still unsure what she is talking about. I climb into the front passenger seat. "So, where are you taking me, August Andino?"

He climbs into the driver's seat with his satchel clenched tightly in his hand while giving me a considered look. The accessory doesn't match the man, but I don't linger on that thought long because he pulls out an iPad. After a lengthy password, he hands it over to me.

The satchel gets tossed into the back seat before August accelerates and takes us back into the game of immortals.

"You know who I am?" he says, finally giving in to curiosity.

"I have eyes and ears on my enemies." I shrug while my hands wring the seat belt. He's a wolf, so like all wolves, he can smell a lie. My choice of words is vague but truthful because I do monitor my enemies – he just doesn't fall into that category yet.

Johannes has already filled my phone with text messages about August Andino, the consulting Hunter, and what is publicly known about him. It is surprisingly limited for one with such a hefty age. My head

remains focused on the road while my eyes try to capture all the details of his side profile.

It's disconcerting how attractive he is. His rough features shouldn’t draw you in, but they do in a way that almost makes you miss the scar cutting through his right eyebrow.

"Is that what I am to you, your enemy?" Those words seem to sit uncomfortably with him.

"The Guard is my enemy. You're an unknown part of that beast," I inform him. "I've yet to judge your intention. But anyone with the reputation you have has obviously caught my interest."

He gives me a side-eye because, this time, he registers the lie. The woody brown in them glistens in amusement. "Andino is the last name I adopted when I became a Hunter for the Guard."

“Consultant,” I correct. “You are a consultant Hunter.”

Whatever that means.

“It’s complicated,” is all the response I get.

"Fine,” I sigh, knowing that I will be readdressing the absurdity of his position in the community. No one in their right mind chooses to be a Hunter. We are chosen and moulded to be weapons for our leads to wield. The question on the tip of my tongue that I manage to stop is… who is wielding him?

“August Andino," I say, nodding as the name rolls around in my mouth. It suits his dark Mediterranean features. I offer him my hand. "Mina Harker."

The introduction cracks something within him, and he allows himself to gently smile. "Well met, Mina." His arms twist awkwardly as he accepts my hand and shakes it firmly.

The smile falls from his lips, but the softness around his eyes stays in place. I take our continued silence as my cue to review the case notes on the tablet.

Her name was Julie Moore.

She was twenty-six and is listed to be from a family of six children. The image of her attached to the file is a cute self-portrait, probably from those Facespace apps? Or is it My Tok? I'm sure Greta knows.

Apart from the personal information, there isn't much else about her death since the human police reported it as *cause unknown.*

"How were we contacted about Julie's death? And what does her death have to do with Griffin? Was she a known acquaintance of his?" I ask after I've gone through the file a second time, not finding anything helpful.

This isn’t something the Guard would typically pay attention to let alone get involved with. Though she was tragically young, a human death is not our business.

"Our tech team gets notified for anything the human police flag with certain keywords. The unknown cause of death caught their attention."

"So that hasn't changed. We are still working in the shadows."

"VH does have connections in the different levels of government, and the Council has its own spies wherever there is a pool of power. Where it's safe, some of the Families have contacts with law enforcement as well. When those humans log anything that gives them a bad vibe or sounds like something that could be supernatural, they send those cases our way. We have a triage team who reviews all the requests, and then they recommend whether we investigate.”

“Sound like a lot of cases come our way.”

“You’d be surprised how often humans think something is too inhuman to be human.” He shakes his head before looking at the tablet. “In this case, the tech team found it when running their regular scans of unusual or suspicious deaths. They flagged it when they saw the security footage." August leans over and points at the screen in my hands. "The footage is saved in that folder on the home screen if you want to view it." I open it up and play as he keeps talking. "On first review, it looks like no one is there, but then you can see the shadows. Even though Jack Griffin is invisible, he still casts a –"

"A shadow. Mmm," I say absently. My shadows stir inside me, curious to know if they are being summoned. I stop them from acting up and becoming a problem.

This isn't about you.

If my magic could huff in petulant objection, they would. These long years out of the spotlight have been difficult for them.

The video starts. The image is blurry around the edges and gives grainy black-and-white footage. It covers the entryway to the home and a small portion of the road. Nothing happens for several seconds. A flicker of light as it disappears and reappears on a wall. The little solar lights lining the driveway capture the movement. It is subtle, yet it’s as convincing as a

smoking gun. I replay it again, and there is no denying it's a person casting a shadow on the wall as they walk past the lights.

The video has been edited to only display the minutes around the flicker of movement.

"I need access to the original version," I say, replaying it again. “The whole video.”

Everything is wrong with the images. To survive, we must be careful of exposing humans to the side of us they will fear. It’s a honed skill that those of us with street smarts can quickly acquire. Griffin is one of the smartest beings I've met and definitely the most conniving. If he intended to enter this residence to cause havoc, he would know how to do it without casting a shadow. Griffin is always transparent in his wants and needs. The man is like a bird, collecting anything shiny and interesting with no regard for the owner of it. Murder is not something he has shied away from in the past, but only when someone was in the way of something he wanted.

Why would he murder a human woman with nothing to gain from the death? That’s not something The Invisible Man would do. This death is different because the motive doesn’t make any sense.

"Huh," I mumble, rewinding the footage and watching it again. And again. Then five more times because my mind and instincts are screaming different things.

August drums lightly on the steering wheel with his palms. The beat grows more impatient the longer I remain silent. He clears his throat and glances at me. "When you're done, there are photos saved in the same folder. They are of the deceased woman."

"Julie," I whisper.

His tapping becomes more insistent again when I switch from the video to the images of the body.

This man presents as cool as a cucumber, but secretly, he is as wound up as a spring. It's good that the twins are not accompanying us because they would have way too much fun setting off his triggers.

"We are still trying to figure out what killed the human," August says, agitated.

I snap my head in his direction. "You still don't know after a few days?"

He shakes his head like I'm expected to be okay with this.

"So all we know for sure is that she was found dead in her kitchen with blood coming from her ears." I zoom in on the picture to focus on the lightly pooling blood around her ears.

"The humans are likely to rule it as a stroke or secondary damage caused by hitting her head on the ground. We are trying to get the personnel from medical and science in to do a secret autopsy. Coordinating that is always time-consuming," August says. “If that becomes too much of a challenge, then we can have a *known* human go to the morgue and review the data that’s already been collected.”

I pan out and take in the whole scene. The woman is lying face down with her head at an unnatural angle. She was dropped to the ground. The singlet and boxer shorts she is wearing is obviously her sleep clothing. As for getting something useful from the pictures about Griffin's involvement? Nothing.

"Van Helsing said that you have a history with The Invisible Man, and that's why he wants you involved."

"Abraham brought me back because he finally found a fish big enough to reel me in," I grumble.

"Why did you agree to come back? You could have turned me away," August asks, his fingers finally stilling from their constant dance.

"It is time to come back," I tell him. He gives me a curious look which I ignore and let him chew on that cryptic answer.

He opens his mouth but snaps it shut again. Whatever question was finding its way to his mouth vanishes and is replaced with, "What do you think killed her?" August asks. I smile down at the tablet in relief, though the images steal any joy I can muster.

"I have no idea. If I can view the body, I might get an idea. This is not my strong suit or something I have much experience in," I tell August honestly. "If those skilled and trained in these cases haven't figured it out, then I am not hopeful of my chances. An autopsy would be the best option to gain the answers we want. If that's not possible, we may never truly know what caused her death. "

"Does Griffin usually kill this way?"

"He is not a sophisticated killer. He's not one to relish in the kill or marinate in the blood of the deceased. He's like a cornered animal. He strikes if necessary but doesn't actively seek to do so," I muse, as I recall his

behaviour in the past. “That means his murders are usually messy and scrappy.”

I shift in my seat so I'm facing August and do the thing I've been avoiding since he entered the theatre room in my home. I size him up and swallow back the knot lodged in my throat.

"Why did Van Helsing send you? What's so special about you?"

"Are you trying to hurt my feelings, Mina Harker?"

"No. I would, however, appreciate a straight answer."

His brow furrows as his eyes dart between me and the road. "Why does that matter? How does that impact this case?"

"Everything matters when you are dealing with me. There are no coincidences when you interact with fables." I wince at using the term I hate. Fable. They should have named us rejects because that’s what we are. Crossbreeds that don't fit into any of the Families. "Fables usually only deal with each other, with a few exceptions. So why send a normal, albeit ancient, wolf when I'm sure Van Helsing could send someone more used to dealing with my kind."

"Ancient?" He tries to suppress a smirk but fails when he meets my determined expression.

"There is no ignoring the energy you are constantly throwing off," I counter. "Don't change the subject. What led you to be at my doorstep?"

He sighs, "I was meant to be having time off. VH thought I was the best person to collect you. He will have his reasons. If you know him, you know I wasn't privy to them. He told me I would take you as a serious threat." August pauses, considering their conversation. "It's not what he said but how he said it. It’s obvious the man cares for you. I'm certain that he sent me because I understand boundaries better than most supernaturals."

I huff as my arms cross over my chest at the insulting yet flattering comment.

Abraham, get a girl some flowers next time.

"I appreciate the candour," I say genuinely.

"I was also instructed to stay there until you agreed to come," he adds with a sly smile.

I laugh, then cover it with a cough. "And you agreed to that?"

"No," he scoffs, still smiling. "I like my head on my shoulders and not rolling in the dirt." He relaxes a little, and it softens something in me as

well. "I told him I'd let you know the offer, then respectfully get the fuck out before you killed me."

We both laugh. "So, why didn't you leave when I gave you the cold shoulder?"

"Honestly? I have no idea. I've lived a long time. The experience lasting from knocking on your front door to being escorted to your basement is one of the strangest encounters yet." August glances at me, a conniving glint in his eyes. "Between you and me, I enjoyed that show with the dragons."

I'm strangely proud of his declaration.

"Ha! You're not so bad for a wolf."

"You're not so bad for a fable."

Touché.

I turn back to face the front and settle in for the rest of the drive. It occurs to me that my hands rest casually in my lap and are no longer clinging to dear life to the seatbelt.

So this is Van Helsing's game?

He sent someone who would make me comfortable enough to let my guard down. That thought motivates me enough to remain suspicious and alert of everything I encounter.

After a pause, August breaks our companionable silence. "I asked VH during your day sleep about your twins…." He glances at me. Humour transforms into something more concerned. "Are they really *the* Hansel and Gretel? Some of the first, original vampires."

"The tale doesn't really come close to match the truth of who they are." A warmth engulfs me whenever I get a moment to consider our relationship. "Their real names are Johannes and Greta. And their story is their own. I'd never tell it on their behalf." I lean closer and whisper, "Though it is true that they are as old as dirt. Stronger than most believe can be true. Don't ever get on their wrong side."

"And what would constitute getting on their wrong side?" August side-eyes me.

I grin. No matter what happens to me in this fraught, decaying world, I live by only one principle - my loyalty to the twins. "They kind of adopted me into their family. I'm assuming you know how some vampires can develop sickly obsessions. Usually, it's a human. On the odd occasion, it's supernatural."

"Two ancient vampires adopted you?" August asks in disbelief.

"They met me in a very unfortunate situation –" My voice betrays me by softening. "For their own reasons, I became an obsession of theirs. Now, they struggle to keep their distance and tend to stalk me if we aren't together. Though it's not as bad as it sounds since I am a willing participant in the bond and am happy to indulge their obsession."

No therapist would call these bonds healthy, and no one who has researched vampires has ever found a cause for why they exist or any sound reasoning. A vampire meets someone, human or supernatural, and they suddenly become possessive to the point of mania. They are driven by their desire to always be with the person, no matter the cost. Sadly, it rarely ends well due to vampires frenzying and draining their bond dry.

Not all are lucky, like my psychotic twins and me.

"Huh." August's head cocks to the side, mimicking the animal he is. "Is that why Dracula became obsessed with you? He had created one of these vampire bonds?"

I freeze as the air in my lungs refuses to leave my body. The words I want to say stall on my tongue.

I want to grab the hand brake and throw this car into a tailspin. Hopefully, the pain caused by being crushed by the metal surrounding me will distract from the never-ending ache in my chest. It's an insidious, permanent rot that mocks me while refusing to relieve my misery.

"Mina?"

My name tickles my mind as it is called repeatedly by a deeply concerned voice. At some point my eyes had closed, yet even the darkness hadn't stopped my world from spinning.

The indicator flickers as the car veers off the highway into the service lane.

"Mina?" It's soft and finally tempts me to open my eyes.

My eyes become corrupted by my vampiric side. The red pins the wolf sitting in the driver's seat. August's wolf rises to the surface to counter my energy. His claws replace his nails and tear into the steering wheel.

"Are you okay?" he asks through sharp teeth. A beast on the hunt for something to kill and curb his feral hunger. He shakes his head like that will help remove the threatening parts of his beast. It works enough that his claws return to nails, and his teeth lose their sharp edge.

"If you ever... mention Dracula to me again. We don’t have the type of history where it is acceptable for you to throw around the name of my husband's murderer." My words are soft, careful and barely audible. I stare directly into his eyes and challenge any dominance trying to control this situation. It’s the only thing I can do to keep my dignity intact and remain a version of myself that I can live with. "Are we clear?" My wobbling voice reminds me that I'm not Mina Harker, the terrifying woman in red. I am Mina Harker, the woman who ran and hid.

"Okay," August says coolly as his body moulds back into his seat.

"Okay?" I repeat. Somehow his words snap me from my stupor, and some of my bark comes back to energise my bite. "What do you mean... Okay?"

"I won't mention it…him again." A shrug. That's his response. It's so simplistic. Too simplistic. No probing. No judgement. "Your history is not my business. We don’t have the type of relationship where those comments can be thrown around."

Shall we play?

No! I want to scream.

"That's all you have to say?" I gape at him when I extract myself from my mind. "No pressing for gossip. No prying into my dark past?"

"No."

Somehow this feels like a trap, so I push the boundary he is content to keep in place.

You can play now, I whisper to my magic.

My red shadows leak out of my skin. They flood to my palms and dance enchantingly as I move my fingers to caress them. August watches them swirl up my arms and around my shoulders until they create my hood. Once I'm draped in my magic, they trickle into the space between us in the car. August leans to the far side of his seat. My shadows shudder in amusement before teasingly impede on his space, finally landing on his exposed skin.

To me, my magic feels like a soft caress – a gentle kiss from a lover. They are always warm and welcoming to me, no matter what mood they find themself in. My experience with my magic is unique. I have been informed by those who have encountered my beauties that a cheese grater extracting a layer of skin would be more pleasurable.

My red magic coils around August’s wrists. He shudders, and not in the pained way I am used to witnessing. His eyes widen in surprise as his mouth forms a perfect O.

He likes us.

“What did you do to him?” I mutter just as August releases a grunt that also could be considered a moan.

Oh my! Did my shadows just...

I’m appalled and startled by August’s reaction that I recall my magic, yanking my shadows back inside me before sliding as far away as I can get on my seat.

The wolf rubs his throat and gulps down air while his eyes remain glued to the dark road before us. I join him in taking in the bleak view.

He clears his throat. That action manages to lock away all the expressions that are coloured on his face. "Are we done here? Can I keep driving?"

I nod, twisting my neck to scout for a sign telling me how far away from Ashford we are. The only answer I can deduce is that we are still too far away from our destination since August accelerates like he can’t wait to get out of the car and as far from me as possible.

The rest of the journey is uneventful, with the exception of August constantly fiddling with the radio, flicking halfway between songs until he could find the one he considers worthy of our trip. I assume it was a nervous reaction, so I bite my tongue to stop snapping at him in irritation.

The car slows down as we near a block of flats before cutting off and leaving us in silence. I remain seated as August climbs out of the vehicle and strolls around the car like he has every right to be in this human neighbourhood.

My eyes flick between the side mirrors for what must be the hundredth time to check for tails or unwarranted local attention. The road remains scarce, as it should for this late at night. I try for the buckle, but my hands struggle with the concept of pushing the button that will force me into action.

"It will be okay. Stay present, and everything will be fine," I repeat the mantra over and over, and each time the words come out with less enthusiasm for leaving the car.

August’s knuckles rap on my side window. I mime trying to wind it down the window by pretending to press the button.

“It doesn’t work,” I yell like he needs the extra help hearing me.

He shakes his head as he opens the door for me like the goddamn chivalrous asshole he is.

"The electrics in cars don't usually work when the car is turned off." The bastard is smug as the keys dangling in his fingers. He waves a gallant arm that points in the direction of the murder house. "It's the first unit."

"Fine," I sigh, unclicking my restraint and climbing into the night.

It's a quaint, red brick unit with different varieties of shrubs randomly placed around the garden bed. My fingers run over a neatly trimmed rosemary bush. The edges define a barrier between the pavement and the garden. I pick a stalk and hold it to my nose to enjoy its soft woodsy aroma.

"Lead the way," I say as I slip the rosemary into my pocket. The street remains quiet, but that doesn’t fool me into letting my guard down.

For the remainder of our drive, I researched the area the victim had lived, hoping it would give me any insight into what happened. It just left me with more question marks. Now being here and surveying the street, it’s even more disconcerting since this suburb isn't a known hot spot for supernaturals. No packs, nests, covens, or other supernatural groups are registered with the local Families in the area. If they are here, they have done a decent job remaining a secret.

"This is all very human," I muse, taking in the other residents lining the road. The homes are all as unremarkable and ordinary as the next; the only notable differences are the children's toys littering some yards and absent in others. The houses are all tainted in a sleepiness that naturally occurs when they are owned by different shifting generations of people, likely on their third or fourth family. A train passing cannot be more than two blocks away. It blasts its whistle to signify the intention of stopping at the local station.

"This doesn’t make sense.” I don’t mention how troubling I am finding all of this. “I am surprised that a suburb like this would capture anyone's interest, let alone for a thief of Griffin's calibre." I scout another block of units over the road. A few have lights on, or it could be the flickering of someone enjoying late-night television. "Supernaturals don't tend to dwell in areas like this," I add. "We either like the cities or, in the

case of some shifter types, rural areas with their preferred type of vegetation." My hands are freed from my sides, and I use them to emphasise each point. "The report didn't mention if anything was stolen from Julie. If the humans ruled this as natural causes, I assume they had no reason to search the premise for anything out of place." I walk over to a rusting, yellow letterbox. "Look at how badly maintained this area has become, August. These roads are full of cracks and potholes. Julie seemed to be among the few neighbours who maintained their front gardens." My hands check my hair is still contained in its bun. Any stray strands are tucked behind my ears as I fidget to release my growing anxiety. "I am making some assumptions here, but Griffin used to steal items that, in modern times, would be worth millions of dollars. What on earth would the Invisible Man be doing here?" I glance back at August, who nods as he accepts my murmurings. "Do we know if Julie had any connections to our kind?"

"No connection has been found thus far between her and any supernatural grouping."

If I hadn't played that security video so many times, I would believe this is a trick of light or an illusion. Yet, there is no denying a person cast a shadow in that footage.

I follow the footpath to the driveway and open the video so I can match the same path the murderer took. Nothing of interest catches my attention. No footprints or interesting markings.

"Did they send any wolves out here to track scents?" I ask.

"The scent and patrol team came back with nothing since too much time had passed," August says, keeping behind me and tracing my every step with his own. I sigh, even though that is to be expected.

With August's height, he can easily watch the video over my shoulder and track it as keenly as I am. When we reach the place on the video where the shadow starts climbing the wall, I freeze the footage and spin around to assess all the different light sources coming off the street.

"The streetlamp is what is directing the shadow's movement," August points at the post with a knowing smile. I hum my agreement as I step backwards and forward to observe my shadow as it changes and morphs with my movements.

"I want to recreate their movements," I tell August. "You stay here. I'm going to stand back on the curb to get a better look."

"Sure," he replies, arms crossed over his chest. He doesn't ask why we need to focus on this when there is more to analyse inside, but the unasked question is written in marker across his face.

Once I have stepped away, August moves to where I stood, trying to line up his position to match the invisible murderer’s path.

“Oh,” my mouth barely makes the sound as my suspicions are confirmed when I compare August's build against the frozen image on the tablet.

"August," I call as my eyes remain glued to the screen. "Take a step closer to the wall." His shadow changes shape with his movements. "Closer," and he takes another step. "Okay, press your shoulder against the wall." He frowns but does it anyway.

I flick to the camera app and snap photos of his final position.

"What are you seeing?"

My pointer finger beckons him over, and the moment he is within reach of me, he plucks the technology away.

I retake the position by the wall, then step about two feet away from the wall to where I figure the person was when they walked past.

"Do you see it?" I ask with an added edginess to my voice.

"You're looking at the height of the shadow," August says slowly as he angles the tablet in different directions before the faint snap of a photo being taken.

"I was comparing height," I say, hoping that he will miraculously discover what I have without me having to say it out loud.

“What am I not seeing here, Mina?” August asks as I join him curbside.

"How tall are you?" I ask. "I'm guessing around 6'1.”

“What has my height have to do with anything?” He’s not impressed, but neither am I because I’ve been dragged from my home to investigate a simple murder. Dealing with the impossible was never part of the arrangement. At my glare, August adds, "I’m 6'2."

"Well, I'm a nice 5'4," I tell him. August flicks back to the photo he took of me and then to the footage of the original of the murder.

"The person in this image is much taller than you.”

“Well, I’m glad we now know I’m not the murder,” I drawl.

“Mina,” August growls before looking back at the pictures. “My guess would be that Griffin is close to my height when you line up the

different angles of the shadows."

"Mmm," I respond before leaving him curbside to walk back up the driveway so I can follow a stone pathway to the entrance of the home.

"The security camera has been taken down," August states as he joins me. He gingerly moves the camera to examine it before lowering it back to its suspended position. Only the power cord keeps it from connecting with the ground. He points at the wall mount.

"See this, here. The wall mount has been snapped in half to disable the camera. It’s a messy break, like whoever did this really struggled to do it. Even a young or newly changed supernatural could easily break this apart with their supernatural strength. This much damage to the mount is excessive and unnecessary." He frowns at it thoughtfully. "Everything I found on the Invisible Man excludes anything relating to his physical skills and magic type."

I open my mouth and then snap it closed due to the misguided loyalty I harbour for my kind. Fables. Mix-breeds. Keeping the finer details of each fable's magic a secret has kept us alive all these years. Griffin is a despicable character. Calling him morally ambiguous would be the closest to a compliment he will ever get from me, always hanging out on the side of villainy. Yet, he is one of the surviving few fables, so revealing his secrets acts against all my instincts.

Instead of replying, I gesture for him to enter the house. We've already spent too much time out in the open. The front door is unlocked, and August holds it open for me to enter first.

The rosemary stalk tickles my fingers before I pull it from my pocket and lay it on the corner of the small straw doormat. August doesn’t say anything as he follows close behind before he snaps the door closed.

"Mina –"

I jump to my tippy toes and slam a hand over his mouth, cutting off whatever he's about to say.

My eyes close as I force my shadows to search the house for prying ears and extra heartbeats. Thankfully, my beauties are invisible to the human eye, and only those with magic in their blood can see my magic. If a non-magical person comes into contact with my shadows, they experience a faint disconcerting shiver like a tickling breeze or a ghost passing over their grave.

Greta's number one rule is always safety first. I direct them to weave a web of dread around the home so anyone approaching will have a near-violent reaction to wanting to stay away. This type of magic is draining and not something I wanted to be doing early in this new adventure. Now that I know there are a lot of new players on the board, I have no choice.

"We are safe to speak now," I tell August as his evening bristles tickle my hand. He tries to speak, so I lower my hand and glance around the space once more.

“Care to explain?” he asks, narrowing his eyes at the new safety addition.

“Soundproofing,” I tell him a partial truth. When he huffs, I give him the rest. “They also are a protection barrier to deter others from trying to come in unless I say otherwise.” I leave him at the door to analyse my magic and walk into the open living space.

He follows when he notices that I’ve moved. "I was just going to say, before you shut me up, that I've got some gloves and shoe covers for you to wear while we are here." He holds up the items before passing some.

Where did he pull those from?

"A lot has changed," I mumble as I grab them, lifting them to examine them.

“Yeah, like DNA. We need to be careful to keep our information out of the hands of human law enforcement." At my confused expression, he continues. “A lot has changed in technology used in laboratories. DNA is what our –”

“I know what DNA is,” I snap. “I’ve seen Law and Order.” I mumble that last bit under my breath. The quirk on August’s lets me know that he heard it. “Is anyone meant to be meeting us here?"

"Yes, they will be here shortly," August replies as he snaps on his gloves. His shoes are already covered, and I try to figure out when he did that. August’s foot taps, drawing my gaze back to his. He looks at my exposed hands and then moves past me. He doesn’t verbalise my inexperience, but he silently demonstrates what is now expected of me if I continue working with him.

"Fine," I sigh, slipping on the gloves and bending to cover my shoes. He pauses and lets me pass him. My gloved fingers run the lines of the wall as I follow it deeper into the home. August remains about a pace behind me. He meets my eyes when I glance over my shoulder. It's clear he

has a question. I just need to decide whether trusting this wolf is a mistake. This could be the trap Van Helsing was planning, seducing me with this wolf.

I turn and walk backwards. My other hand is now on the wall. August cocks his head to the side, not realising the debate roaring inside me.

Do I trust August?

He hasn’t done anything to harbour trust in me. Conversely, he hasn't done anything for me to trust him. It’s a conundrum.

Trust the wolf.

I want to ask why my senses are telling me to trust, but they tend to have good instincts, so I take a back seat in the decision and let them guide me.

"There is something I have decided I need to tell you." I end up sitting on the square armrest as I back into the couch.

"Mina?" August steps toward me. His hands demand answers as they perch on his hips.

"What I'm about to tell you... I would prefer it if it stayed between us until we better understand the situation of Julie’s death," I say slowly.

"Please don’t treat me like a fool, Mina Harker. I am not so gullible to agree to anything unless I know what it is exactly, in very clear terms, what I'm agreeing to."

"That's fair," I nod as I push off the couch and meet his firm stance in opposition. "How about this…You were once a man before you were changed into a beast. A man who lived in a time when a promise was sturdier than stone under your feet. It was everything that bound a man to a task, to his purpose. His honour."

He laughs, and I rock back on my heels. The wolf is laughing at me, but as quickly as it starts, it sours.

"An ex-hunter of the Guard dares to question my honour?" He scoffs.

"No." I shake my head and take a tentative step closer. "This woman is asking a man for his word. A person who was also raised on the notion that a vow comes from a declared promise is sacred."

"And what is the promise you want me to make? Will I lose my future virtue if I break this bond?" His plump lips curl on the ends. He is mocking me now.

I want to run my claws down his face.

I don’t respond to the violent inclination for two reasons: the seriousness of this situation is worth treating with the respect life-altering revelation deserves, and my magic seems to like him.

"Your trust," I reply. “I need you to trust me… and I need to trust that you will not reveal to others what I am about to share.”

"Trust?" His head falls back as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Stop yanking my tail and just tell me what I need to know.”

The arrogance of his demand has my fangs baring, and I hiss at him. I catch myself as I go to take another step closer to him and take a deep breath to calm myself. I force my fangs to settle before responding.

"Fables are all different. We are unique. Regardless of differing powers, other fables are the closest thing I have to a species since I am no longer classified as a mage. And I’m damn sure not classified as a vampire."

His hands slide from his hips as my request catches him off guard.

"I hate what I am.” I hate that my voice cracks as I admit that. “I am a crossbreed. A paradox. A big ol' question mark. It’s the same for all of the others thrown in the fable category."

August edges away from me until he sits on the couch I was just propped on and provides me with his undivided attention.

"Griffin is a piece of shit. A criminal. A murder. But he is one of *mine*. Am I making sense?"

"You need me to protect the secrets of what makes a fable." He sums it up so succinctly that I left with all gusto and no air.

"Yeah," I sigh, move to the couch, and sit down. August joins me, leaving a respectful space between us. Both of us stare ahead at the blank television.

"You want me to keep the secrets of your kind.”

“Yeah.”

In the reflection from the television, I witness a soft smile from August. “I can agree to that. I can agree to keep those types of secrets for you, Mina." He shifts to face me. Our knees bump, so I slide my legs further over to recreate the space while meeting his eyes. "I give you my word, Mina Harker, fable."

My throat dries as I try to swallow. The thank you I reply is so soft that it’s barely a whisper.

"Tell me what I need to know." August is straight back to the case. I smile gratefully at him for not making us bask in the stench of this moment of weakness. I jump to my feet and pace a safe distance from the couch.

"Griffin and I have an interesting past. I've been charged with bringing him to face the Council on several occasions." August's face becomes blank as I speak, so I continue briefing him on our history. "Pre all this fancy technology, it was impossible to keep track of the Invisible Man, let alone keep him imprisoned. It was agreed by those in charge at the time–"

"The Council," he interjects.

"Mmm, it was a different iteration of people. But yes, the Council. They allowed Griffin to continue his criminal activities so long as it didn't bring attention to our world. Whenever he did something outrageous or pissed off the wrong human government, I was called in to bring him back in line. Beat him up and send him on his way." I stop pacing because it just intensifies the anxiety clawing around inside me.

"Okay?" August asks, thinking that my change in movement was me needing a response from him. “That’s your history summed up. What about his abilities?”

"Griffin was born an immortal."

"He is an undying? A true immortal?" August asks, sitting up and leaning forward.

"Yeah. You know how they come to be. Born human, they live normal lives until they reach a particular age when they suddenly stop ageing. They remain that way evermore. It’s random. It’s rare. They have no other magic other than being impossible to kill. Cut off their head, and a new one will eventually grow. Disassemble them, and somehow, they will slowly reassemble. Because they are rare, and you never know where one will just pop up, they are hard to track. They also tend to find it much easier to stay hidden in society."

I'll never admit this to anyone, but immortals as a species terrify me the most. The fear of death is humbling, and we all need reminders from time to time of the fragility of life. When you know that life is endless, it makes you reckless, which leads to casual callousness and cruelty.

I continue. "Griffin’s tale is as old as time. He wanted more power and strength to match his immortality. On his journey to becoming a powerful supernatural, he did the impossible and robbed an illusion mage of

their magic. Since the magic running through our veins sustains our lives, draining the mage of his magic killed him."

"He actually stole a mage's powers... That is..."

"Impossible? Yeah… that is the specialty of a fable." I shake my head. "Griffin became the magic. He became an illusion and faded into the man he is now." I square my shoulders as I meet August's gaze. "That's the origin story of the invisible man. This happened long before I was born, but I've heard this story from Griffin himself. I don't know how much of it is an indulgence on the real truth. But others who lived around the same time have also conferred rumours of similar stories."

A furrowed brow makes the formidable wolf appears sweetly innocent. "As interesting as I find everything you've just explained, what does that have to do with the case?"

"I was building to it, wolf. I am a damn fable, and the definition of a fable is owning a thrilling morality story to attach to our mystery. So shut up and let me entertain you with the surprise ending."

August smirks, eyes alight with hidden laughter. "Sorry to interrupt your grand tale. Please continue."

"Not long after the man became the monster, anyone who knew what he looked like mysteriously died." I ply August with a knowing smirk. "The end. You can provide applause and throw some coins in my direction."

"Mina," August blinks before shaking his head, "Are you saying that there is no one alive who knows what he looks like?" August says, stunned.

"Look at that, folks, we have a winner." I point at August and shoot him a wink. "The only living person who knows anything of the physical form of Griffin is... me, and I have made sure to keep those details to myself."

"How? Do you know him by touch?" August looks repulsed.

"No. Don't even joke about such a disgusting notion," I squeak when I realise what he is insinuating before glancing away and focusing on August's promise to keep the secrets of fables. This is the real secret I don't want to share, and it's about myself. "My shadows tell me things."

He rubs his forehead. "I don't know what that means. How does your magic tell you things? That doesn't make any sense. Powers don't communicate."

"Forget my magic," I say quickly. "Let’s focus on the man who supposedly committed the murder of a random woman who doesn't appear to own any wealth or currency that he can abuse."

"Okay."

If there was a word I could remove from the lexicon, it would be okay. It’s lazy, it’s passive-aggressive… It is a terrible word to use when many more are equipped to define a mood.

"I don't know features like hair and eye colour, but I know other things. Foot size. Gait. Weight, and…." I looked pointedly at him, expecting the correct answer to fall from his lips.

"Height," August says with a heavy sigh. "You know his height."

"That I do." I smile, which quickly turns into a frown.

"And?"

"Griffin – the Jack Griffin I have been chasing for centuries is 5 '5. A mere inch taller than me." My hand hovers just above my head as August blinks in realisation.

"The shadow from the video was created by a much taller person," August says as he stands and compares my hovering hand to his own towering bulk. "Griffin was never here."

"That's my thought as well." I lean back to meet his gaze more easily. Several emotions flutter over his expression until back is the crinkle in his brow.

"Fuck’s sake, Mina! Have you been building to tell me that we have another invisible man?"

I nod slowly and finally let all the dread I have been suppressing show on my face.

"This isn't the end, August. This is the once upon a time of a whole new tale."

Chapter 6

Mina

"Could there be more than one invisible man? Is this really the only answer?" August asks though it's more muttered musings than actual questions.

"Griffin’s existence is impossible. But…maybe lightning does strike twice sometimes. I know as much as you do right now.”

Now that’s a scary thought I don’t want to consider right now. If we can have more than one Griffin, what about the rest of the fables?

My shadows buzz in my mind to pull my attention to them, and then they flash an image of a car pulling up.

"There must be another explanation because the obvious one cannot be it," August says. Looking at him, I find him still mostly speaking to himself.

I move to the front window and peer between a slit in the curtains. A stern male and a harmless-looking female are walking side-by-side toward the unit. My eyes narrow on the large man. He is a werewolf I would love to never be in close quarters with again.

Of course, they'd send fucking Fenris.

I like to refer to him in my mind by the name I have coined for him, *Asshole Fenris, the worst of his kind*. He's a favourite of the ruling wolf pack, which makes him even more unbearable since he knows they will always back him. He plays the role of investigator, a person who builds the case for the Council. Hunters hunt those who are found guilty or those who are trying to avoid facing justice. If it wasn’t our personalities clashing, then the power dynamic that comes from working in opposing jobs tips us over.

"Our escorts have arrived," I call over my shoulder. I summon my shadows to me before the new supernaturals can sense them. As I move to open the front door, August gently grabs my elbow and bends so he is close to my ear.

"Let's hear what they have to say. If they don't suspect what we do, I will keep this secret until we have more information to assess the situation."

He looks past me and stares at the closed door. "Whatever is going on here could cause mass panic for supernaturals. Griffin is the bogeyman who we tell pups about to scare them. Now, we have another who is completely unknown…."

"My lips are sealed," I say, swinging open the door. "It was a simpler time when *I* was the bogeyman that people warned their babes about. It never bothered me, the idea of making children cry." August gives me a sly grin which I enjoy returning before I ignite my glare and aim it at asshole Fenris.

"Fenris," I say in a lacklustre greeting to the werewolf.

"Mina Harker," he grumbles, matching my glare while his own. “Nice to see that you’ve been dragged from whatever cave you were hanging in.”

"Ah, you know each other?" August asks as he positions himself behind me. A hand lands on my shoulder, but I shrug it off.

"Regretfully," Fenris grunts, bringing me a lot more joy than it should.

"Fenris likes exercising his will against deadly things that can easily destroy him,” I add with a mouth full of fangs. “I would have killed him years ago if he wasn't a personal lapdog to Galen and the rest of the werewolf ruling family."

"I’m not a fucking lapdog. I never did anything wrong by you," he snarls. His canines come and join my fangs.

"You hunt my kind. So I take a lot of pleasure in killing yours." I bat my eyes. “But only when one of you breaks one of the laws.”

"Disgusting Vampires. It will always be a disgrace how you will claim vampirism over your respectable mage heritage. To think you once held a place of honour."

A hand covers the fist I didn't know I'd formed as it trembles by my side. I follow that hand up so I can scowl at August. He may be able to prevent a physical altercation, but a hand cannot stop my shadows. When I call on them to act, they remain content inside me and refuse to bring Fenris to his knees.

"We need to get through this," August whispers through gritted teeth. He doesn’t bother trying to hide the tension he carries as his fists expand and contract over mine. I know he is right, so I retract my fangs, encouraging Fenris to stop baring his.

Does he also hate Fenris, too?

"Fenris, introduce your partner," August growls, his head tipping toward the petite woman tucked behind the other wolf.

"You know her, August," Fenris responds so aggressively that I take a step back in surprise and end up smashed against August's chest. I sidestep him and create some needed space from these wolves as I eye them all suspiciously. My banter with Fenris, though mean, is just spiteful words from two creatures who will never agree and hold different opinions of this world. The venom Fenris is spewing at August is bordering on deadly and reminds me who this male really is.

Fenris is a beta wolf who is too dominant to be part of a pack. The werewolf pack hierarchy is a precarious thing that can easily be rocked. Dominance and the designations associated with it will always be the best and worst things about wolves. No alpha trusts a beta with too much dominance because they unintentionally cause power imbalances in a pack. These wolves usually become outcasts or lone wolves destined to live lonely, solitary lives. Fenris is conniving and found a way to be of use to the ruling family. When the Guard was originally being formed, he was positioned inside as an Investigator to give the wolves eyes and ears in the institutions that police us. So, to me, Fenris is blabbing snitch since I'm not affected by wolf politics. To a wolf as dominant as August… I can see how issues naturally occur as neither would willingly submit to the other's authority.

I miss working alone.

"And yet, Mina does not know who your partner is. Good manners would dictate that you should be the one to introduce her since she is accompanying you," August says, clapping his hands behind his back. His posture and behaviour throws us back to a much politer time before even the Guard existed. The female werewolf has somehow become smaller during this confrontation. I copy the little female and let my eyes ping-pong between the men as they try to silently battle.

This pissing contest will leave us staring at two limp-hanging dicks as we all drown in the stench of a cocked leg.

Fucking wolves.

Should we punish them for wasting time?

I groan and shove those ideas away.

Fenris considers August’s words as he stares at the little female beside him. She glances up at him with a timid smile which he returns with a heavy sigh. He may be a complete bastard, but he is a proud werewolf and would never act in any way that could be used against the ruling family.

He straightens as he gestures to the female. "Abby, this is Mina Harker. She is a *crossbreed* and formally a Shadow Witch of the ancient Coven Umbra Soror." The woman is wide-eyed at my name. She rubs her hand frantically against her pants before offering me a hand. I accept the hand and shake it slowly. The cute little wolf struggles to get her eyes past my chin as her hand quivers in mine. When we release each other, I scowl at Fenris for many reasons, mostly because he knows better than to use my old coven’s name.

"Mina, this is Abigail, " Fenris says, already bored by this interaction. I wait for the information about her pack, but it doesn’t come.

“And you’re associated with what pack?” I ask.

She blushes and glances up at Fenris, expectedly.

“We aren’t here to talk about Abby,” Fenris says, glaring at me for some new reason.

"Well met, Ms Harker," Abby says with a soft southern accent as she accepts my hand, and I take the opportunity to appraise her. Her shoes hold a slight heel that gives her a touch more height than me, and everything about her seems to be the opposite of me. Where I am light, she is dark, and where I am dark, she is light. She has the glow of youth and not the stench of stale years.

"You can call me Mina. No need for the formality among Guards," I tell her while not taking my eyes off Fenris.

"Of course, Ms Mina. Shall we?" Abby steps around me and further into the house. "Hi, August," Abby stumbles over the interaction as red touches her cheeks while her eyes become pinned to the floor.

"Why are they recruiting them so young now?" I ask Fenris with a tone that demands an answer. Anyone joining the Guard is expected to be able to stand up against some of the greatest strengths and ages in our society. Creatures with thousands of years’ worth of accumulated strength and magic. Sending out someone this fresh into the darkness of our world is just turning the youth into fodder.

I don’t like it.

"Well, I am twenty-five, Ms Mina. I am an adult by anyone’s definition," Abby innocently tells me, not understanding the severity of my unspoken accusation.

"Twenty-five years as a wolf? That's still young. At least you've been around long enough to understand how our world works and who the players are. I’m hoping some of those years were spent studying the laws." I send her an approving smile, ready to move on with the night. The glare that Fenris shoots August when he clears his throat has my eyebrows inching up. I've clearly missed something.

"Oh, no, Ms Mina. You misunderstand. I am twenty-five years old. I'll have been a werewolf for a full year in a month."

If my eyes could, they would bulge out of my head like in the weird cartoon Johannes obsesses over.

"Twenty-five?" I say with my tone getting pitchy. "Twenty-five?" I ask August, who just silently nods at me. For some reason, he is amused by the mutant vampire-mage surging with rage in front of him. My eyes must be red because my fangs are tearing through my gums to threaten the wolf who brought a child to investigate a murder.

"This is wolf business, Mina," Fenris says as he sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "You need to stay out of this."

"August, what do you have to say about this? You couldn't condone this?" I turn to the man who has been playing the role of my partner to seek a genuine opinion. The notion that I care about when this man’s thoughts become concerning, so I turn my back on him and focus on the other two.

"August knows where his nose isn't needed," Fenris says, wearing an eat-shit grin. "He had his chance to become someone in our society. Hold a place of respect. Instead, he chose this lone wolf bullshit."

I add that piece of enticing information to the file I’ve been building on August in my head for another time.

"Are the Guards forcing you to be working in the field? Couldn’t you at least be an administrator or something less dangerous?" I ask Abby, ignoring the old wolf whose balls will explode when they meet my knee. It is an overdue event that I am very excited about.

"Ah? An admin assistant isn’t really something that interests me. Working for the Guard is actually one of the safest places for someone like me. I love everything about it. And everyone is always so friendly to me." She pauses. "It’s rare that things turn bad enough that I hold any real fear

for my life." That is stated with a sad chuckle. It’s the turning bad part that has me restraining a snarl.

"Someone like you? You’re just a pup," I say, making another assessment of the tiny female. Nothing about her seems to be anything but standard for a wolf. Abby opens her mouth. It snaps shut again when Fenris directs his glare at her.

"Let's get started," Fenris grumbles, pushing past us. "If you were here yesterday, you'd already be briefed like the rest of us are. This is a huge waste of my time. Don’t expect me to be playing the role of babysitter again," Fenris snaps on his gloves before practically throwing a pair at poor Abby. She snatches them from the air and struggles with the latex until they are firmly in place.

"We were delayed," August says, running a hand through his hair. This brief conversation has managed to age him several centuries.

"Get off your soapbox and get on with it, Fenris, you old grump," I add with a grin.

Fenris bares his teeth at me again, so I display my fangs in response. He fumes as he stomps toward the bedroom.

"As you can see, Julia rented this one-bed, one-bath unit. There isn't much to this place, so it didn't take long for us to perform a search. We returned everything how we found it," he adds when we all crowd around the entry to the room.

The doona on the bed is crumpled and thrown to the side like they were kicked off instead of peeling it back.

Was Julie in a rush to get out of bed? Was she angry?

Fenris points to a chest of drawers lining the back wall. “Those drawers were messy like that when we got here. She was either very messy, or Griffin riffled through her clothing. He must have found what he was searching for since the rest of the house is organised and tidy. The scents are too old to get anything of interest. Everything obviously smells like the victim.”

August and I walk into the space. A small trinket box that's been upturned grabs my attention. I flip the box over, and my thumb slides over the fairy carved into the lid. It’s something you'd gift a child to keep their little bits and bobs. Picking it up, there is a small inscription inside the lid.

A treasure for my treasure.

I sigh as I place the box back on top of the drawers where it probably used to live.

"Was there anything of value here, Fenris?”

“Not that we found,” Fenris says from the door. I glance back at him, and he shrugs.

“Everything in here seems to be fortunes of the heart. All sentimental. I can’t find anything expensive. All of her jewellery is fake costume stuff.”

“What would a thief want here?” August asks, leaning over my shoulder to look at the collection of jewellery I found hanging inside her wardrobe.

"We cannot be sure until the human police can get more information from her family," Abby says from behind Fenris.

"Thief? You mean Griffin," Fenris interjects with his jaw clenched. "You must have viewed the security footage already. You may not have crossed paths with him, August, but most of us at the Guard have had some experience with that monster."

"Yes, Griffin," I reply. August glances at me, and I subtly shake my head since I’m not ready yet to make any judgments about what we are dealing with.

"You should have killed him centuries ago." Fenris’ wolf makes an appearance as it shimmers under the surface of his skin.

"Like you, Fenris, I used to be under orders. My orders were to stop him. Talk to him. They were never to kill." I’m already bored of this ageless argument. “Besides, he was an immortal before he became a fable. Killing him would have been a fruitless request. The man cannot die.”

"The only reason you never tried killing him was because of your filthy mages. They wanted to experiment on him and create more. Learn how he did it. You are all the same. Trash."

I roll my eyes, walking out of the bedroom. He pretends it’s my vampire side he finds offensive, but Fenris hates anyone who isn’t a wolf.

"Aah, Fenris. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Let's not dig up the past because I can assure you that your precious werewolves were not innocent bystanders in the mess we call history."

Abby scurries to stand at my side. Her finger is suddenly in my eye line, pointing toward the kitchen. I’d forgotten she was here since she is the personification of a wallflower.

"This is where Julie was found." Abby crouches in the middle of the kitchen floor. Her gloved finger points to specks of blood on the white tile. "She was bleeding from her ears. These little dots are all that's left behind."

I crouch next to her and deeply inhale. "I can't get anything off these. They are too small and too old." I stand, shaking my head. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Y'all know what we know," Abby says. I raise a curious brow and glance back at asshole Fenris. He made it sound like we were years behind on the information when there is nothing helpful here. Abby notices the tension and smartly assumes that I'm about to argue with her partners again, so she adds, "There's really not much to know right now. Fenris said this was a courtesy meeting before you leave to hunt down Mr… erm… Invisible Man."

"You can call him Griffin. The man does not deserve any ounce of respect from you," I say.

Abby nods, standing up. Her throat crackles as she clears it. "Fenris said you usually don't attend crime scenes and that VH gives you strict orders you have to follow. Orders for executions." She flushes as she glances back at a smug Fenris and a frowning August.

"Some advice, little wolf. Ignore anything coming out of Fenris' mouth." I open Julie's fridge and inspect the contents. The scent of decaying food hits me hard, so I close it and move to inspect her cupboards.

"Oh! I didn't just insult you, Ms Mina. I'm very sorry if you thought I was... You make me nervous because you are you… you know… Mina Harker." She whispers my name like it's a secret.

I smile and send it in Abby's direction. I'm glad she is nothing like her partner.

"I am aware of who I am." The smile slips a little when Abby turns and can't see my expression anymore. I move to her dining area, which is set up like an office, and give everyone my back.

What Abby said about my past is a truth that I'm not ready to confront. I allowed myself to be used as a weapon. An instrument of death. My suffering made me hard and lacking emotion, and it only became easier to perform executions as each one desensitized me. Hearing my failing aloud reminds me of my rationale for wanting to stay away from the Guard and Council. I don't want to be that version of Mina anymore. Life with the twins is not the same as the life that was stolen from me when Jonathan

died. But life doesn’t always turn out how you expect. Different never means worse. Those two psychos are now my family, and I will fight till my death to keep what we have built.

I flick through a tray of invoices, and nothing jumps out at me as hints to Griffin. I glance around the space and confirm that there is no other place to run an eye over. August emerges from a door that leads to the bathroom and shakes his head as he meets my gaze.

So there is nothing helpful here.

"If that's all, and there is nothing else to know, then I will be heading home," I say as I head to the front door.

"No, that's not all," Fenris says from behind me. I jerk around with my arms crossed, waiting for the next round of verbal sparring to commence. "Van Helsing wants you to report in."

"I'll call him in the car on the way back to Mina’s residence," August says as he approaches and positions his body slightly between Fenris and me. He doesn’t realise that that home is no longer mine and that I’ll have to find the new home base the twins are setting up.

"He demanded Mina’s presence at headquarters," Fenris adds, way too pleased at delivering that piece of upsetting news.

August's eyes flicker to mine. He remains blank as his hand reaches back and takes hold of my wrist. I gape at the touch. I’m ready to snatch my arm away when his thumb acts completely unexpectedly. It swirls in soothing circles. It’s subtle and gentle, and somehow, everything I needed to remain calm at this moment.

"I'll report in person once I have taken Mina home for her day rest," August counters.

"It's cute that you consider yourself important enough to have a role in this, August *Andino*. Mina owes the Council an explanation for her absence and how she plans to make amends for the hurt she caused those who bestowed upon her far too much trust." Fenris smirks. "It’s time to come back to your real home, princess. Van Helsing is at HQ and is expecting *you*." He doesn’t need to say the threat because it’s as clear as day. I agreed to return to the fold. This time, there won’t be an easy out.

“Fine,” I hiss at him. “I will report to Abraham with respect to his position in the Guard.” I yank my arm from August’s confusing hold.

“Did she call Mr VH… Aa-by his first name?” Abby whispers, reminding me again that she is witnessing yet another argument. We could

be going on some kind of record.

“And the Council? Where is there respect after everything they have done for you?” Fenris is now growling.

“Do you want to know my thoughts on the Council?” I ask, marching to the front door. When I am next to the rosemary stalk, I tug off my feet coverings and make sure my gloves are loud as they snap off my hands. "The Council? They can kiss my shadow-loving ass!” I slam the door with a little too much strength that it bounces back open.

Oops.

August groans as he walks out behind me.

"We will meet Van Helsing at headquarters," I yell, not bothering to look back as I march toward the car. Just as I reach for the vehicle, it beeps and unlocks. August manages to make my toddler tantrum into a smoothly timed exit.

"Damn! That was a boss move by August Andino." I chuckle as I slide onto my seat.

Chapter 7

Mina

“When did they move headquarters out of the old side of Ashford?” I ask as August directs the car into an underground car park. He follows several ramps down until we are sufficiently buried under concrete before pulling into a parking spot.

“They relocated to the warehouse district about five years ago.” August climbs from the driver's seat. I unclick my seat and let it slide through my fingers to buy some time as I scout this concrete prison for exits. Exits keep me calm, and not having a clear one makes me want to hyperventilate into a bag.

“I should have taken that mindful breathing technique Johannes was teaching me seriously,” I mumble as I climb from the car.

August is still speaking, not realising that I am having any kind of personal crisis.

“The humans working near the building in Old Side were becoming curious about us since we were in prime real estate by the bay and yet seemed abandoned during daylight hours. Since moving here, maintaining the privacy of our dealings has been much easier.”

I meet August at the back of his car. My fingers grip my bag, causing the wolf to give me a sympathetic look that borders on pity.

“Your history here is none of my business. Let’s be clear, I’m not getting dragged into whatever issues you have with anyone inside that building, Mina.”

“Is this a pep talk? Because it sucks,” I snap.

He ignores me and keeps speaking. “Regardless of all of that, I’ll have your back, Mina. You have my word.” August strolls off, and I stumble on wobbly legs as I try to keep up with him.

I grab his arm and pull him to a stop. “Just like that? Your loyalty now lies with me?”

“Loyalty? No.” He shakes his head like that is an outrageous idea. “I have a soft spot for anyone who sticks a finger up at the power at be. No

matter how foolish I find that act to be," he says as a sly smile grows. "You're the most beautiful middle finger I've ever seen."

"Who knew that wolves could be funny," I say, trying to hide my own smirk.

It bugs me how much I like this wolf.

August leads me to an elevator that is activated by his cell phone. When the doors open, his phone is swiped again to light up the control panel.

"What happens if someone presses the other buttons without the phone thingy?" I ask, leaning in to inspect the technology. I have no idea how this works, but I like it. It could be a good addition to my next home. No keys, just swiping.

"The lift locks down. Security is then notified." August points at the ceiling. "Sleeping gas can be released from those vents. You will wake up in the dungeon if you mess with security." He grabs my hand just as it hovers over a button. "Please don't cause a security breach. There are so many other things we need to be worrying about right now."

"No need to get handsy," I say, pulling my hand back and moving to the corner. I eye the vent.

The rest of the ride is quiet, which stirs the butterflies in my stomach. I thought I was past the point of becoming nervous at new places or meeting new people. Situations that will likely mean my death, they make me nervous. But here at the Guard… There is no denying the dread. It's like going into battle, and there is no denying the angst about confronting the man who was meant to be my friend and confidant. His betrayal still feels so callous that you'd think we were enemies.

The elevator dings as the doors slide open, snapping me out of my plaguing insecurities.

I let a distance build between August and me, pretending to be aloof and studying the choices of décor. Though the bland, empty walls don't help my cause. Really, I am scouting out the building for exits and places to hide. Potential weapons.

August slows, so I match his slowing pace to maintain our distance. He sighs at my procrastination and speeds up again. When we get to another locked door at the far end of the hall, he stands with arms crossed and a lazy smile, waiting for me.

“No one here believes that you are just enjoying the artwork,” he says, pointing to a mounted camera I’d already spotted.

“No?” I feign surprise with a hand over my mouth. “Are they already onto me?”

“None of us are that stupid. A tip from one threat to another.”

I chuckle. “Maybe I need to be more subtle?” I call on my shadows, and they snuggle into me to create my scarlet hood. I sigh at the feeling of them against my skin. Even though they are part of me, they also are like another entity. An old, and sometimes terrifying, friend. “Better?” I ask. My shades sway like there is a breeze in this stagnant hallway.

“As subtle as a sledgehammer,” he laughs and shakes his head before swiping for entry into the restricted area that’s already secured inside a locked building. All this security is redundant at this point.

A chorus of gasps has me jerking my head around. I compose myself by plastering a sly, knowing smile and let my crimson beauties glisten around me. With my expression forcing my confidence, I greet all the stunned expressions with bored amusement. The further into the office space we walk I become assaulted by the delicious smells of supernaturals. Another reminder of how starved I am for a meal.

I hate when Greta is right.

“All work and no play,” I mumble toward the islands of desks over-stuffed with electronics and papers. Chairs become boats as people slide between desks to speak to their neighbours. Those I walk past stare agog as they tap their desk buddies on the shoulder. It’s like a family of meerkats scouting for danger. Little heads pop up and down, double taking at the show my magic is putting on.

August opens a door at the end of the hall. After one final look at the sea of people crowding the office, I follow him. The empty conference room is bland and furnished with a heavy wooden table, surrounded by ugly leather chairs. The walls are off-white, making me think of them as more of a light brown. The back area has a depressing yet clean buffet with small kitchen appliances. It’s bleak and mundane but worse… it’s so normal.

My finger traces the edge of one of the chairs.

“This is disturbing.” I’m not only referring to the pleather under my touch. My gaze narrows on the bar fridge. It’s stocked with Red-Eye. I let go of my shadows, and they furl back within me as I head straight for the fridge. I touch every bottle within reach until I pick one toward the back

and close to the middle. Sometimes you need to play the odds to win. Other times? Being random in choice may prevent me from being poisoned or drugged.

“You’ve become paranoid in your old age?” a new voice enters the room.

The intrusion has me bumping my head on the edge of the counter. I straighten slowly with the drink in my hand while keeping my back facing the newcomer. This man doesn’t deserve the respect of my immediate attention. He can wait until I am ready to address him. Once the hiss of the opening bottle settles, I take a gulp. It does not satisfy my blood thirst, but it does provide enough sustenance to stop me from wanting to hunt out my next live meal.

After another gulp, then another, and one more for good measure, I turn and relax my magic so they can make a show of dancing down my back. Fluttering like the wings of a newly birthed butterfly.

“Abraham,” I state with no inclination for my feelings toward him. Amazingly, the spit in my mouth stays instead of being projected at his spotless Ralph Lauren leather shoes.

“Now that you’ve realised that we aren’t trying to poison you, I’m hoping common sense prevails and it reminds you that many vampires work here. That supply is available to all vampires in the building. I don’t plan on poisoning my entire vampire staff.”

I take another sip but don’t let my eyes leave his. He’s a man that will always be considered handsome in any time period. His is a timeless that makes him all the more disarming.

I wish I could enjoy his beauty, but I’d prefer his face with a broken nose, a few missing teeth, and even a black eye. Harm, not death, because wishing death on an Immortal is a waste. They may not be able to die, but pain will always bother them.

No reprieve in death for the undying.

“Take a seat,” Abraham says. August provides me with his back as he positions his bulk in the seat in front of me. He graces me with a glance when I come and rest my hands on the back of his chair.

“Interesting choice, August. You give your back to the bigger threat. You’re either blindly confident in your special relationship with VH, or you really are just a stupid mutt.” I lean in while maintaining my stare off with Abraham and whisper, “I’m secretly hoping for the latter.”

I glimpse the momentary quirk of August's lips as Abraham just lets out a tired sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose. We've been in a room together for less than two minutes, and I've pushed too many of his boundaries.

"I'm going with the third option," August replies, his hands cupping the back of his neck as he reclines in his seat. The man is far too relaxed for the tension permeating through this room.

Maybe he really is stupid.

"Why am I here?" I ask as I step back to lean against the mini fridge.

Abraham fiddles with his jacket and then fidgets in his seat. He even flicks some non-existent dust off the table. He is tired. It should be impossible since he is an immortal. Nothing about his appearance can change from the moment he went from human to supernatural. And yet, he is here an exhausted mess.

"Griffin –"

"Here are my terms for gaining my help." I am more assertive than I ever have been previously in our relationship. I want to be the driving force in this negotiation.

"Okay then, Mina. Tell me what it is you would like." His hands settle in front of him on the table. I walk to the opposite end and sit down. The glass bottle slaps the table as I place it in front of me. I mimic the men by taking my time to find the sweet spot in my chair. To build on my impression, I kick my heels up on the corner of the table. I take another sip of my bottle, and somehow, this position makes it taste all the better.

"I want August," I say to begin the negotiations. August coughs as he tries to wipe away the childish Christmas morning excitement plastered on his face. "He is the only person I will work with –"

"Is that so?" Abraham interrupts with a sick form of amusement.

"We have grown close these last few hours," August muses with a smirk.

"Shut up!" I chuckle, throwing my bottle cap at August before I direct my attention back to the head of the Guard. My feet come off the desk, and I sit up. "As for the case? I need access to the unedited version of the house footage and anything else you have found that proves Griffin was there. I want access to any files or data I need." Abraham's face remains blank, so I continue speaking. "I am not back joining the Guard

permanently. I am only here to make right by the dead human and to figure out what mess Griffin has created. I'm not getting involved in anything outside of this case."

He opens his mouth, about to object to my terms for returning here. His mouth closes as if cogs are slowly winding in his head. He nods. "Fine. I agree with that. For now."

I ignore the *for now* comment and continue.

"I want to be the one to bring Griffin in." Abraham lets an emotion slip past his façade at that request.

"Your arrogance, as usual, is exceptional. You only want to dip a toe back into this world, yet you want to be the one to bring Griffin before the Council."

"Exactly." I take another sip to hide the hurt at his word-delivered punch. It's not arrogant to want control.

"They may change the terms regarding his freedom this time. With technology, there are much easier ways to contain him now."

"They wouldn't," I snap, my hands slapping the table. August is concerned with his furrowed brow. Noticing my attention on him, August gets up and grabs a bottle of water from the fridge. He stays standing while looking at the table like it's contagious.

"A lot has changed since you left us, Mina," Abraham says, sighing and bringing my attention back to him.

"No, not since I left. Since *he* came back," I snarl. "You allowed this to happen when they kept *him* alive instead of executing him for his crimes. He was proven guilty. They all voted, and it was a majority that found him guilty. He should have fucking died," I roar.

"I didn't have a choice." Van Helsing's fists beat down on the table. It quavers under the assault. Even the table has become a number on the list of innocent victims in this story.

Abraham takes a deep breath, calming down. "You were in such a bad way after everything that transpired with Jonathan and your imprisonment. We found you locked in a dungeon, and you were a… whole new creature. When you were finally in your right mind, I didn't have the heart to tell you that Dracula wasn't executed but kept comatose."

"Nope, we aren't–" Without any prompting from me, my shadows form a hand and raise a cheeky finger in the air before waggling it furiously. I pinch the bridge of my nose, exasperated. It would be funny if it weren't

at the expense of my broken heart. “I’m not here to revisit our previous friendship. I’m here for Griffin. Everything else… Dracula, you, or Council is not my concern.”

Van Helsing cocks his head. “Here I was hoping that you were finally coming for revenge. I wanted some fire and spine. Why won’t you scream and yell? Make some threats, for fucks sake.” He shakes his head like he is scolding a child.

“You want me to behave like a child. It doesn’t matter how much noise I make. It doesn’t bring back the dead or undo the past. I am here. This is me now.” My shadows wrap around me in a twisted form of a hug.

“You’ve been tamed, Mina Harker. You’ve been sticking your head in the sand, and for what? You’re wasting your power and the legacy of your family name. Jonathan wouldn’t recognise who you are right now.”

Silence, because what can I say to such a comment that is the equivalent of standing in a sandstorm? Grain by grain, I am buried, rendered helpless until I finally suffocate.

August steps forward. “I’ll take Mina to the offices, and we can start the review of footage.” His words don’t do anything to cut through the tension. The wolf comes to my side and holds out a hand. “Mina.” It’s soft and gentle. I stand, ignoring the hand.

Hands are sexy.

“For goodness’ sake,” I mumble, forcing my lingering magic to return. I hate that the comment almost made me smile.

As August and I reach the door, Abraham stands. His hands busily run down his suit.

“Do you keep in contact with the other fables?” Abraham asks with too much confidence for a man I’d like to run through with a sword. “Do you still monitor your kind?”

A chill tickles down my spine. They are an unusual bunch of creatures. I am one of them, the youngest to be made. They are my people, and I’ll not have Van Helsing or the Guard doing anything to disturb them from any semblance of the peace they discovered.

“Fuck you, Abraham Van Helsing. Fuck you.” I turn to stare him down. “There will be a time when you really need me. On that day, you better hope that you’ve made amends with me because there will be no wiping that smile off my face when I finally find a way to send you to hell.”

He takes a step toward me, hands in his pockets. “It was way too easy to get you back here, just a small amount of intrigue. I expected more resistance. If I knew it would only take Griffin to bring you out of hibernation, I would have provoked the thief into action years ago.”

I shrug, giving him my back, and smile at August as he holds open the door for me to exit the conference room.

“Mina,” Abraham calls once August lets the door naturally slide closed. The hallway is way too rambunctious for this time of the evening, even for nocturnal creatures. Everyone is hovering as they try to get another glance at the freakshow that is my existence. My fangs are flashed at anyone bold enough to make eye contact with me.

“Mina,” Abraham says again as he follows us outside. His presence ruptures the onlookers from their suspended reality. I chuckle as they all scamper away like rats at dawn.

I glance over my shoulder at the man I once considered brilliant. Abraham walks right up to me. We stare at each other, neither wavering in stance. Nothing can distract us from this moment. His beautiful face softens to angelic. His hand reaches up like he wants to touch me. Grab me. Shake me. Caress me. He thinks better of it as it changes trajectory to rub his forehead.

“It’s not Griffin, is it?” He barely mouths it, but the words are crisp in my ears.

I lean forward, ensuring my breath coats his cheek. “No, Abe. The man in the video is not Jack Griffin. There is a new villain in town.”

I savour one of the few moments I get to witness the stoic bastard expressing genuine emotions. It starts with confusion, then transforms into shock before settling on dread. It’s the perfect trifecta.

Chapter 8

Mina

Abby is flustered when she finds us in a crowd of desks. “I have organised an office space for you, Mina. Someone from the IT department is bringing up a work laptop. I hope that will be acceptable to you.” Before I can reply, Abby is smiling at August. “I’ve had your stuff moved in there as well.”

IT department.

“This is all very… professional. Efficient,” I say as my fingers glide over a desk and come up clean of any particles. Not even a crumb.

There are cubicles in the back corner, then open desks arranged in groups covering the rest of the flooring. Plants, shrubs, and a cluster of succulents occupy all the other vacant spaces. At every desk, someone is sitting behind a screen, typing away. Well, that’s what they pretend to do when I catch them staring.

“A lot has changed in ten years,” August says as he takes in my bemused expression.

“I’ve been around long enough to know how slow the world changes. The Guard was never a bureaucracy. It worked in the shadows and never used any technology that could expose us. They were scared of using fax machines. This quick evolution of the Guard is surreal,” I say.

“We are finally on the front foot and being proactive here. Our tech teams are the best you will be able to find,” Abby chirps. “We have a recruitment team who seek out suitable humans to turn, usually into vampires, because adding to wolf packs quickly can be problematic.”

“How strategic of them,” I scoff. “Let’s add more *blood demons* to this world because we need to have our computers fixed.”

Abby’s mouth opens and closes a few times before she tucks a stray piece of hair behind her ear and ducks her head.

“Be kind,” August whispers just for me. “Abby is only trying to be informative. I think you make her nervous.”

“Apologies, Abby.” I smile weakly at her, and she returns a more genuine one. “This is a lot of change for my old-school brain to comprehend. It’s no longer the little gang that used to police our world.”

“Thank you, Ms Mina,” she says. I swallow my groan at the continued use of *Ms*. Abby's phone dings. She digs the phone out of her back pocket and reads the message with an excited giggle. “Ooh! Your new space is ready.”

Abby rushes off with her head held high, leading us to a small room at the back of a sea of desks. “VH said you both need a separate space away from us from the rest of us since you are now a team,” she says with a touch of curiosity.

If you had told me this room was once a storeroom, I would wholeheartedly believe it. Filing cabinets that would have lined the room now crowd the space outside the entrance. There is just enough space for two simple desks and their accompanying chairs. In a sad attempt at making it not feel like a cleaning closet, someone even added a drooping fern on one of the desks. I hum nonchalantly at the space. It’s so cosy that it’s bordering on intimate.

“I’m so proud of the facilities team right now. They worked so quickly on this,” Abby chirps.

Facilities team?

The twins will be in hysterics when I tell them about this nonsense. What’s next? A caterer?

“Mmm, impressive,” I mutter. August’s hand squeezes my shoulder. He is trying to remind me of my manners again.

Abby waves her phone in her hand like that explains everything before she starts tapping away on it.

Ignoring her, I move to the desk, running my fingers over the unnatural material. A synthetic something that will never feel like the real thing should. I choose to take the desk with the depressed plant and dump my bag before rifling through it until I find the small device that Johannes showed me how to use. Turning it on, I move to a corner of the room and start waving it around.

“What is she doing?” Abby whispers to August.

“I’m checking for little listening things. Those bugs,” I answer before August can. Once all the walls are cleared of spy technology, I move

a chair under the bright strip lighting and check there as well. Nothing. It's time to sink to my knees and climb under the desk.

"Ms Mina, we did not bug the room," Abby splutters. Her head appears under the desk, bending over to continue watching me. I shuffle to August's chair before checking my own.

"And now, I know that," I reply, crawling out from under the tables and climbing to my feet. Abby takes a big breath in, preparing to say something else. A cough from August has her mouth shutting.

I place my hands on my hips and stare at the two screens sitting on the desk I've claimed. I grab the mouse and start flicking it around. Nothing happens. My finger then starts clicking the button on the mouse to try and turn on the computer. Nothing. I slide out the keyboard and start pressing the spacebar. Enter. Escape. Delete. When they don't work, I slam the keyboard with my hands like that will finally perform the magic of making the useless screen work.

"Abraham said I would have access to everything," I say, grabbing my hips with a slight snarl forming.

August frowns at my desk before his face scrunches in confusion. "Is that a tang of fear I detect that VH is not fulfilling his agreement? Or…" August muses. "Is it something else like learning to use a computer?"

I withdraw my hands and redirect them towards the sad fern. I pluck a stem off a plant and let it twirl around my fingers.

"I remember the invention of the elevator… that was scary. This –" I point at the complicated desk set-up. "I'm not scared of this," I snap.

"Do you know how to use a computer?" Abby asks slyly, making August laugh. This humour shining out of her is the boldest I've seen her yet.

"Oh, as the gods as my witness! You don't know how to use a computer." August gives me this pitiful look. "And yet, you used the tablet so well. You were remarkable with your role pressing play that show the other night," he adds, smiling. "So you're not completely useless."

"I haven't needed to engage with much technology," I mumble. "If I need something, I have people to ask." I clear my throat. "I play candy crush on my tablet, so I know how that works."

Abby and August laugh hard, so hard that the little female even lets an accidental snort slip.

There is a knock on the door performed in a familiar tune before a head pokes into the room.

“Sound like a fun party in here. Seems like I arrived at the right time,” the man says, his gem-coloured eyes telling me that he is fae. “Here is the laptop you requested, Abigail,” the man adds as he holds up a black bag.

“Thank you, Evans,” Abby replies sweetly as she grabs the bag from his fingers. The fae, Evans, moves like he intends to also squeeze into this cupboard. The glare I shoot him has the fae quickly withdrawing and scampering away. She pulls a slim computer from the bag and stands beside me.

“This is your laptop. If you want the two screens to work, you’ll need to connect it to the dock.” She inches between me and the desk and does as she just described.

“Docks are for ships,” I mumble. Unfortunately, I am in a room filled with wolves and their sensitive hearing, so my comments only further provoke their amusement.

The screens come alive and display a login screen. Abby digs into her pocket and pulls out a little piece of paper.

“Logins and passwords for you.”

I blink at her as the fern spins in my fingers. She receives my silent confusion loud and clear and starts typing all the details into the computer. Once it’s signed in, she then talks me through all the applications I will need to access while working here.

August is grinning, enjoying this way too much.

“I think that’s all I can tell you right now, Ms Mina,” Abby says, shrugging.

“Thanks, Abby, for all your help,” August says from his side of the room. She glances between us before backing to the doorway and excusing herself, leaving me and August alone.

“I guess we are partners for the foreseeable future,” August says as he unpacks his laptop from his bag and connects it to the shipping dock. I turn my back on him and push out my shadows. They are lazy as they crawl around the room until the walls are covered by them. A perfect crimson bubble.

“Soundproof barrier,” I say with a shrug when August gives me an annoyed glance.

“You’re going to have to tell me more about your magic,” August replies.

“When my magic physically manifests like this or is the form of my hood, it’s mostly harmless. You only need to be concerned about my magic’s intention when it’s in its shadow form. That’s when it becomes violent.”

“Mostly harmless? That’s all you’re going to say?”

“If you want to know more about me, read a book,” I counter. “Everything I have allowed as public knowledge is well documented. I’m sure there is a special section in the archive dedicated to Mina Harker’s shadows.”

“Why read a book when I have a direct line to you?” There is something in his tone that sends a chill down my spine. I turn around, but he is tapping on his computer and not paying me any mind.

“Hello,” Greta says when she answers my call. August’s head jerks up, and a smug expression grows on his face.

“This must be your reason for neglecting technology,” he says, shaking his head as his.

“No, it's Johannes that does all my stuff. Not Greta,” I retort, making Greta chuckles on the other side of the line.

“I like him. He is spunky,” the twin says. “And he’s right. You do need a crash course in technology. I’ll make sure Johannes sits you down and gives you a run-through in current tech when you have a spare moment.”

Oh fun!

I glare at the wolf, who is now wearing a strikingly similar expression to a sheepish one. The proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing is a real thing.

“You like anyone who gives me a hard time,” I drawl, hoping the glare I am now directing at her zaps her in the tits.

“True. Very true, my Mina.” She hums, “What do you need from me and the idiot? What do you know, and who is behind all of this?”

“I need to know any and all of Griffin’s recent movements. Find his contacts and tell them I am looking for him.” I rub my brow. “I’m going to be reviewing the entirety of the security footage here at HQ. I’ll message

you if I find anything useful to help with the search on your end. Tracking Griffin must be the priority, though."

"Understood." Greta's voice pitters out, already building the lists of tasks for her and her brother in her head. There is nothing like a Greta list. Her to-do tasks are so detailed they practically have personalities. Those personalities bond with other like-minded activities and sprout children with their own set of lengthy complexities and demands. It's a whole micro-universe created by Greta when she wields a pen. It's scary stuff and something that Johannes and I try our best to stay away from.

"Talk soon." Greta hangs up. I shift my attention to the laptop sitting in its dock on the desk with the sad plant.

"Does she suspect the same as we do about Griffin?" August asks as I sit down behind my desk, facing him.

"Of course. I'm sure Greta knew the moment she saw the details of the case. Just like Abraham already knew, he just needed me to confirm his suspicions. We are likely the one slow to the party." I click open the applications that Abby showed me.

"How did she get those details?" August's voice has a layer of gravel added.

"I emailed the twins from your tablet. I may be hopeless with technology, but I do know what email is."

"That footage isn't for you to hand out to anyone," August growls, pinning me with his eyes.

I hiss in response, not liking his tone. "They are not just anyone. That is Greta. And if you were properly educated about the origins of the Council, you'd shut your mouth." That comment has surprise overtaking his features. His knowledge is alarmingly sparse for someone with his years behind him. It's becoming more than baffling. It's concerning. "Greta and her brother are also my greatest allies. They are family, and on top of that, they used to be my handlers for all jobs I was assigned to. Abraham Van Helsing, the top-ranking families, the damn Council might hate them because of their legacy, but no one ever makes the mistake of not respecting them. No one is that foolish." I'm practically panting after that impassioned speech. "It's god-damn-fucking Greta!"

"Alright. Alright, I understand." August rubs his forehead as tiredness washes over him. I doubt he rested during the day hours spent in

my home, so he is probably running on empty. For that reason, I let go of the tension I am holding and don't mark this against my opinion of him.

"I have seen some of your files –" August starts to say and adds when I lean back in my chair with my arms crossed. "They never mentioned anyone partnering with you. Always made you sound like a lone wolf. Pardon the pun."

"They wouldn't mention them. It's part of their arrangement with the Council. They stay out of the way, and no one keeps tabs on them. Including reporting their distant involvement with the Guard."

"Unusual deal."

"Yes… well, we were dealing with unusual politics."

August glances back at his computer. "Fenris has emailed me the entirety of the security footage. I have an email here saying that Fenris and Abby will be taking point on Julie's deaths. That means they are managing the relationship with the humans on this. They will be looking into ways to learn the cause of death." He turns one of his screens as he presses play on unedited footage.

I drag my chair closer and press a button to increase the volume on his keyboard. Much to my annoyance, it does nothing because no sound is attached to this clip.

I slide further around the desks and am surprised when my fangs begin to ache. His scent is much less repulsive than when he first arrived at my house. When I register that my body is becoming in tune with August's heart as it forces blood to move through him, I cringe. I clear my throat, and the rasp calls to attention my need for blood.

"We are in charge of bringing in Griffin." His voice calls my thoughts away from his pulse until I am faced with a conversation I missed most of.

"August," I ask with an embarrassment that I haven't experienced since I had to learn and embrace my new diet. "Do they stock blood here? Like the fresh stuff." Or preferably a person, but I don't say that last thought out loud.

"They have blood available on request. You will need to make a call to the catering team for it. Usually, it can be ready within the hour." Whatever is written on my face has him asking, "What?"

Catering team.

“Is it really that easy?” I ask, still in disbelief that there is a group of people who fetch different meal types while also relieved that I can soon be free of this aching hunger.

“An internal review was completed on work productivity a few years ago. The vampires raised the issue they had with needing to leave to find their own blood supply, whether bagged or human. And Red-Eye doesn’t sustain them long-term, as I’m sure you know. It wreaked havoc on their productivity and prevented them from working effectively with other species. So it was arranged that meals could become available for vampires requiring it. They make similar allowances for other supernaturals. Schedules are made with the full moon in mind for us moon-cursed beings. They also have a smaller office building with its own acreage for those who can’t join their packs for full moon runs.”

“Productivity?” I chuckle wryly. “What has happened here? We used to sit in a dark, dank, candle-lit room – even when electricity was readily available. I’m talking about the in the nineteen-eighties. No electronics; everything was paper. Johannes had to come and yell at Abraham to allow me to have a cellular phone. Though that was more so he and Greta could stay connected with me.” I shake my head. “You talk about productivity like the Guard is actually… a real organisation. Not a bunch of outcasts hunting down the bad guys. This is like a thriving business with its own letterhead. Is this a publicly listed company? Do people here own stocks in this place?” I pinch the bridge of my nose and groan. “This is so surreal.”

August shrugs like none of this is breaking his brain. He moves his mouse and restarts the video. “While you sit there and figure out how to overcome your struggle with reality, I’m going to watch this to find any more clues to what is going on.”

I edge away from him when his pulse recaptures my attention. A request for August to make the call and order me blood is on the tip of my tongue.

Do I really trust this place enough to take something at face value?

No – which leaves me hungry and with my magic waning.

I ignore my hunger and focus on the problem in front of me. “There is something specific I want to view,” I tell him, sitting up and sliding my chair to the screen.

“You drive,” August says as he places the mouse in front of me.

I skip the video until the seconds before the murderer enters Julie's home. You cannot see the door open and close, only the shadows sliding out of view. The lights must have all been turned off since nothing lightens in the footage when the person enters.

"Okay, the timestamp is 12:53 am," August says. "Fenris said in his notes that the camera was taken down at 1:40am."

"The murderer was with her for almost an hour," I reply. "I wish there were sound accompanying the video. We could hear if they fought. Anything to give us a bigger clue about what happened." I slump back in the chair. "What are the possible scenarios?" I ask August as I map the events of that night out in my head.

"There are three options I have deduced." August taps the desks with a pen as he stares into the distance.

"Only three? Not four," I chuckle. I don't know why I find it amusing. It could be the certainty of his tone or his confidence in his skills that highlight how lacking I am in mine.

August ignores me and continues laying out his theories. "Her death could have been a wrong-place wrong-time type scenario. The murderer didn't know she was home, and they had to improvise with some kind of… magic when she woke." I nod my head at that conclusion. I could pick too many holes in that one, so I mentally put it aside and hope August's next ideas would be more concrete. "Option two, the person knew she was home and went over to interact with her. Like engaging in a conversation or argument that all went wrong." I nod at this explanation because that seems to be more fitting. "And thirdly –"

"The murderer went there specifically to kill her," I say, knowing in my gut that this is the most likely scenario.

"He arrived at the house somehow wrapped in some magic invisibility. If you wanted to have a friendly conversation, you wouldn't arrive cloaked, would you?" August is pensive as he stares at the ceiling.

"Julie must have known her murderer. That piece of information hopefully narrows the list down of who did it." I grimace because there is still so little we know. Less because we have to be careful with tampering with the evidence the humans collected. No one has found any obvious connection between Julie and any supernatural groups. "I want to see Julie's body." I sway in my seat as my eyes search the screen for a hint of an answer.

“I’ll organise it,” August types away on his phone.

I groan in annoyance when nothing else of interest happens in the video. There aren’t even any cars driving by that we could look into. It’s just a quiet, uneventful street.

This frustration is why I preferred the position of Hunter. The waiting around was minimal because every minute wasted gave my target more distance.

“How do you fit into this, Griffin? I know you must be involved in this somehow,” I mutter, rolling myself in my chair back to my desk.

“Do we still consider him having a role in this?” August asks, looking up from his phone.

“How can he not? This is his magic, his curse… whatever you want to call it. Do you know how many other supernaturals have the ability to turn invisible? Even for a short time?”

August’s brow furrows. “No. I don’t know everything about all the different types of mages. They are the only group who I would consider the possibility of having such a rare ability. Maybe a few types of fae… Though glamours don’t usually work that way. Glamours change a feature, like the shape of their pointy ears. They don’t remove the ear altogether.”

“A mage’s magic is coloured. You can see it when they are using it. So even if they could achieve some kind of invisibility, you’d still see a tinge of their magic colour. Shadow mages would be the closest, as their magic is black. They’d cloak themselves and blend into the shadows. But a shadow mage couldn’t create an image like the one we saw in the video.”

August eyes my shadows that are still swimming in the air around us. “Yours is red.”

“Indeed, they are red,” I drawl. “This is the second time this evening that we have established that I’m not the murderer.” I know he is commenting on my change into a fable, but the wicked part of me enjoys feigning ignorance to make him shift around uncomfortably for a moment.

August clicks and plays around with the footage. I open the email app on my laptop and start typing random combinations of letters. The fidgeting doesn’t jog my mind, but it does help settle the gnawing hunger.

“Griffin had something to do with this,” August tries the notion out loud. “Has he ever tried to replicate what he is? Make more of himself?”

I laugh. “Of course he tried. Thankfully, he isn’t like a vampire or shifter and can easily turn a human into a replica of his form. The first time

I was sent after him was because the Council had found a trail of dead bodies that had been used in his experiments. A mage had also gone missing, and my people were concerned about his welfare. It turned out that Griffin paid this mage to conduct more experiments. Griffin was given a slap on the wrists and told not to leave so much destruction in his wake. The consequence for the mage was much more severe. I took the man's head." My own head falls into my hands. It wasn't my first sanctioned execution, but it was the first one I committed against one of my people. Someone I knew. I press down on the space bar and watch the cursor flicker into a new blank page. "Since then, I have been the one sent to reign Griffin in when he gets out of control. A pointless leash because he doesn't care about consequences."

"Pointless." August's clicking stops as his head pops above his computer.

"Griffin is immortal, so when I cut off his head, another one sprouts back in its place. Gotta hate those immortals," I grumble.

"Shitty immortals," August mumbles in agreement.

"Mmm, but the mage. When I cut his head off, it stayed off." Shame fills me when the lifeless head rolls into my mind. Those empty eyes were crying for forgiveness from a soul who had no mercy and had been given the power to inflict death. He begged me for leniency, and he quoted pieces of our history. He is dead, and I am now shaded grey and regret how I behaved.

It's not the first time I have experienced remorse for the action I've taken at the behest of the Council. Death used to be the core purpose of my life. It was an easy way to starve off my grief by inflicting it on others. There are no excuses; my punishment is to live with this ever-present haunting of their souls.

"The camera breaking is about two minutes away," August says, pointing at the screen. I jump up and return to August's side to watch the last minutes.

Light flares in the image, covering the whole front yard.

"They've opened the front door," I whisper, not wanting to disturb the movement on the screen.

The camera twists, going from views of the blackened sky to images of the ground. It moves back and forth three more times until the joint breaks. We see the pavement coming fast until the footage swings around.

Before the movement can settle, the camera is twisted and turned to face the rendered wall behind it, blocking the street and front door from view. August jumps forward a few times, and nothing changes, just a blank wall.

“We didn’t see anything useful,” I grumble in defeat. My irritation has my shadows sparking, so I tighten my emotions so they don’t cause havoc and start destroying the room.

“Does Griffin have supernatural strength? Would someone mimicking his skills have any additional powers?”

“This is an answer that stays in the vault.” I check the shadow’s soundproofing is still secured before speaking. “From my entanglements with him, my guess is that his skill remains the same as an immortal. Immortals are slightly stronger than a normal human. Their power lies in their resistance to death. Unless he has changed a lot since I last saw him, he has not spent time building his physique and strength, so I’d say his fitness would be similar to someone who is into amateur bodybuilding.”

“If that’s true, he should be able to break that camera with one snap. The person who did this obviously lacks that extra layer of strength.”

“That’s interesting... No matter how we dissect this, Griffin couldn’t have been the person who entered that house. He could have easily broken the camera stand.” My hunger gnaws and distracts me again from being useful. “Just another *thing* to add to the mystery.”

August’s phone pings. “Abby’s got someone at the hospital who can get us into the morgue tonight.”

A glance at my watch tells me it’s getting closer to dawn than I’m comfortable with. My day sleep can be postponed for a few hours so long as I remain out of the sunlight, but not having a secure place to sleep is risky. There is no way I am using anything they might have available here. And that doesn’t solve my eating issues.

“Can it wait till tomorrow night?” I ask, chewing on my lip. Which is better than finding someone else in this building to nibble on.

August dials a number, and Abby’s sweet voice pipes up on the other side.

“August, what can I do for you? Y’all know you can leave your office to speak to me. I’m only three desks back from you.”

“I know where you sit,” August replies with no emotion. “Can we examine Julie’s body tomorrow evening?” August stands and moves to the

office door. Abby is waiting on the other side with a limp smile when he swings it open.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could help, y'all. I thought I added the details in the email I sent to Fenris," Abby says, sipping from a mug with a smiling sunflower decorating it.

August quickly scrolls through his phone and frowns.

"What is it?" I ask, trying to peer over his shoulder.

"Julie's body is being moved tomorrow. The human authorities are classifying it as a stroke. Her family wants to commence their religious rites as soon as possible, which means her body will be relocated tomorrow at eleven am, preventing us from any further ability to access her. If they embalm or cremate her, you have no chance of gaining anything from the body."

"Can't we stop this? Like… steal Julie's body," I splutter in frustration. I mean, it's barely been two days. We need more time. I need more time. "We can keep her until tomorrow night and then return her."

Abby laughs before she checks my expression and blanches. "Oh! You were being serious." She peeks past August to stare at me wide-eyed.

I glare at August when he gives me a dry, *be serious* kind of expression. A heavy sigh from the old wolf and then another one, like I'm a chore he has been procrastinating to deal with.

"Please try and remember, Mina, that times have changed since you were last here. We can't steal a body. That might have been acceptable decades ago –"

"More like centuries," Abby mutters.

"Fine. Fine. Let's go to see Julie now." I check my watch again, grab my bag, and march to the door. "We better hurry up then because I'm running out of nighttime hours." I walk out the door, weaving my way back through this forsaken building to the lifts.

"Coming, Mina," August calls, but the sounds of his footsteps are absent.

"Is she always this eager?" Abby asks with genuine curiosity. I slow my steps and let my ears prick at their conversation. I tilt my head to keep both of them in my eye line.

"It's hard to guess what motivates her," August says as he shuffles around his desk. "But I'm not brave enough to keep the famous huntress waiting for me."

“That’s definitely not smart,” Abby chuckles. “I’d hate for her to use silver on you on your first night together.”

“Goodbye, Miss Abby.” August’s tone is relaxed, comfortable, and so different from anything else I’ve seen from him. I turn around completely to watch the interaction with an unabashed curiosity.

Abby blushes and gives a timid finger wave. The hand drops to her side when she notices me. Her interest in the floor peaks to Sherlock Holmes level of analysis.

If only Sherlock was a real person and not a figure of fiction, then this mystery would already be solved and I’d be back at my house finishing the rest of the House of Dragons series.

Feeling guilty for spying, I turn and walk off with a gentle smile kissing my lips.

“Why do you look so… weird?” August asks, catching up to me at the lift.

“Once I find Griffin and then beat the ever-loving shit out of him, could we find a way to create a real-life Sherlock Holmes? It doesn’t have to be exactly the same as him, just a new kind of mystery-solving fable.”

The man dares to laugh at me. And he continues chuckling until we reach the car.

Chapter 9

August

“Something has been bugging me,” I say to Mina as she picks at her nails mindlessly, eyes searching the darkness. Her fidgeting has slowly increased since we started driving. I flick on the indicator before changing lanes just out of curiosity for what would happen if I broke her absent focus.

“What is that?” she asks, turning those deep blue eyes on me. They shimmer to red before they fade back to their natural colour.

“Is something wrong?” I ask instead of answering her question. The investigation can wait until I figure out what is causing her to be on the brink of running away so fast that only a husk remains in her seat.

“Why would you ask that right now?” she snaps, but it hits softer than her usual word bites.

“You’re acting… twitchy. And your eyes are…”

“I need to feed.” Her head falls to her hands before shaking from side to side. “I need fresh blood, and it’s been a long time since I’ve pushed my hunger like this before.”

“Oh,” I say as a foreign sense of guilt overwhelms me. I should have considered this in the office when she asked about feeding. I’m usually alone when working, so I'm not used to considering someone else's needs.

“Don’t worry about it,” she mumbles, brushing off my thoughts. “You were saying something else before deciding to interrogate me.” She waves a hand down her body in case I had forgotten who is sitting a foot away from me. My eyes track the lines of her form she’s highlighting even as I fight against it.

“Interrogating…” I chuckle in amusement. That must have been the lightest interrogation in history.

“Mina, I’m not… Never mind.” I give up on this topic and move back to the original one. Tapping the steering wheel to an absent beat, I try to figure out what is niggling at me. “I need to talk these thoughts out. Start to finish.”

“Go for it.” She sits up as I become the entirety of her focus.

“Someone with invisibility like Griffin broke into Julia, a human female’s, apartment,” I state the facts we are confident with.

“Can we say break in? There was no sign of forced entry. No smashed windows. The door was intact from my memory.” She turns on my tablet, which she has claimed for herself, and flicks through the original brief. “There is definitely no sign of damage to doors or windows. The only thing that tells us that she had company is the shadow and the camera breaking on the exit.” Her eyes go distant, tracing the potential paths in her mind. “Either the door was unlocked or –”

“Or the other person had a key.”

“Or they knew where she kept one.”

I point a finger at her, giving her credit for that thought. “With either of those factors as lead contenders, the murderer must have known her. It’s becoming indisputable at this point.”

“Is that what’s bugging you? Understanding how they gained access to the house?”

“No,” I say after a considered pause. “I can’t make sense of the behaviour of the intruder. I think that’s what is bothering me. How does someone entering her house lead to her sudden death?”

“Okay, I’ll continue reading the file aloud. Maybe it will help your blocked thoughts,” Mina says, scrolling through the information before reciting information about the house and the state of her bedroom before moving to the description of the body in the kitchen. Finally, she reads aloud the limited information we have on the cause of death.

“He was there less than an hour,” she adds as an ending point. “Any of that help?”

“They must have left the way they came, through the front entrance,” I add. “That would be the best assumption.”

“We know that because they broke the camera stand,” Mina states, putting the tablet back in her bag.

The camera? That is what is annoying me, so I take the silence in the car to work through whatever is niggling my brain. I sigh when I’m left frustrated and empty. “There is something strange about what the murderer did to it.”

“They positioned the camera so they couldn’t be seen leaving,” Mina says carelessly, shrugging. Suddenly, she jerks her head toward me.

“They didn’t want to be seen!”

“They didn’t want to be seen,” I repeat as everything clicks into place. “What if –” I speak as the pieces finally fall into place. “– The invisibility is temporary, and whatever this person took wore off before they had a chance to leave. They would have had to move the camera so they weren’t seen leaving.”

She hums as she chews on that idea. With her vampiric speed, her phone is in her hand and is dialled out. It rings once and before the teen girl is back on the phone.

“Greta, do you know anyone who could operate magic that could cause temporary invisibility? The magic doesn’t have to have a long life. It could only last minutes.”

I nod my agreement at that assessment.

The line stays silent way too long, but Mina waits patiently, trusting the girl is still on the other end.

“Nope,” she finally says stiffly. “We would know about something like that. You, Mina, would know about something like that.”

“Maybe,” Mina says, no longer sounding convinced of her previous sentiments where she declared this was impossible. Greta grunts in disapproval of Mina’s passive disagreement.

“Mina,” she sighs. “You know how the Council classifies supernaturals. The undead, the shifters, the magic users, and *fables*.” Mina nods along like she knows this. “The undead is your fabulously stylish vampires and insufferable immortals –” Mina snorts and slaps a hand over her mouth to smother her amusement. “– They don’t hold magic, just the ability to maintain long life. Shifters, they have internal magic that allows them to shift in whatever abomination they are. Magic users can harness internal and external magic to manipulate the world around them. Magic users are those deceitful fae, pompous mages, and pathetic-wannabe witches.”

“Is there any group she actually likes?” I ask. Mina waves me down before focusing back on the call.

“And then there are fables…” Greta adds with a quirk to her voice.

“Yeah, I know all about them,” Mina replies, rubbing her brow.

“Only a type of magic user would be able to toy with the possibility of what you're talking about. And that leads us back to the beginning of our conversation. Magic doesn’t completely remove evidence of itself or

someone. You would have found more evidence at the house. Any wolf of a decent vintage should be able to smell the traces of magic."

"You're right," Mina relents. "Have you found Griffin yet?"

"I would have told you if I had." This time Greta sounds resigned, even a little stressed.

"Is it Johannes?" Mina randomly asks, making me suspect I'm now privy to something that isn't my business. Yet my ears remain pricked to learn of what is coming next.

"Yes." Heavy sigh. "Mina, my love. He needs you. He's in so much pain. I forgot how bad it is for him when he's suffering heartbreak and you're not around to soothe him with the bond connection. I was careless with my words earlier this evening when I reprimanded you both. You've never left him in his times of need before, or you'd take him with you. I didn't think it would be so… bad after all these years." I am certain there is a sob before she barely mutters, "I worry for him."

"It's been five years. He should be getting better. Where have you set up a home base?" Mina taps the clock mounted on the dash and bites back a curse.

"I've organised to open up an apartment I bought in Ashford. It's close to headquarters. It's dusty as shit, but it's acceptable until we can make it homier."

"They moved from the old side," Mina informs her.

"I am aware of that." Now Greta is snapping through the phone. It's like dealing with all the seasons in one conversation. "Just because you have checked out of friendly society doesn't mean we have."

Mina rolls her eyes like a child would at a parent who's scolding them. "Send me the location. I'll head straight there once we visit the morgue."

"Fine. One more thing, have you fed?" Greta's tone is crisp and demanding. I glance at Mina, who shakes her head and then does something unexpected. She throws the phone in the back seat and curses under her breath. I give her a confused look.

"Why did you do that? Did you even end the call?" I ask. It's deceptively adorable the way her brow crinkles. "Do you know how phones work? Or am I adding this to the list of your deficiencies?"

"I'm sure Greta would have hung up her side, so it doesn't matter." I remain staring at her with a slapped expression. Mina shifts in her seat,

avoiding meeting my gaze. “Does it matter that I don’t press the red button? Whatever… I hate those controlling things. Always beeping and making noise. Johannes is always changing the settings and passwords… It makes it hard for me to get my messages…” she mumbles, straightening with hands clenched on her lap.

I choose not to poke anymore at the sore point, leaving us silent all the way to the hospital's entry. I’ve been here enough to know where the morgue is located in the building, so I lead the way. My footsteps echo while hers remain quiet, almost absent if you didn’t know to look for them.

“Do you want to talk about what is on your mind?” I finally ask, snapping the silence that’s been lurking between us.

“I do not.” Her signature bite reappears as she moves in front of me with strides that are too long for her legs.

The weight on her shoulders has doubled since her conversation with Greta. Whatever coded conversation they were having about the boy has her worried.

“Can I ask about… them?”

Her palms slam onto a set of dividing doors, which has them flying open and grabbing the attention of staff and patients hanging around on the other side.

“Ask away, wolf,” she purrs, though it sounds like a trap. She spins so she’s walking backward down the endlessly blank hospital hallway.

I know I need to tread carefully with my curiosity, but I’m still foolish enough to ask, “Who are they to you?”

Tipping her head, she manages to leer down at me even as I tower about her. “How is it that you are as old as you are yet so ignorant of some of the most deadly and ancient of the vampires? The twins are the original big scary boo.” She shakes her head in dismay as she gives me her back. “They are my family. Our relationship extends to hours and not to a point where I want to discuss them with you.” If she spat poison in my eyes, it could have been less harmful than her tone.

“Okay, the vampires are a touchy subject. Noted,” I mutter. She doesn’t realise she has told me more than she had intended. Family is a strong word when used in the context of supernatural relationships.

Mina stops suddenly and throws her head back, and groans in frustration. “That was unnecessarily mean,” she whispers before facing me.

Her feet stall. “Apologies. My temper was uncalled for. Greta and Johannes – we are a unit. That’s all I will say on the topic.”

“Not my business,” I tell her for what is becoming a theme of our relationship. She exists, and I must accept that I will never know her beyond the persona. I glance around at our position, and a smirk paints my face as my arms cross over my chest. Her apology is a means to manipulate me since she doesn’t know where the morgue is located. Mina has no choice but to follow me or risk getting lost in the hospital.

“Would you like to continue leading the way, Mina, or would you like me to show you how to get there?”

Her lips purse and eyes shift, letting me know she knows I’m on to her. It’s all a game. The stakes feel high, like if I let her continue acting like a brat, I will lose my opportunity to gain her respect.

“I’d hate to stop you from performing such a gallant act like escorting a female. Oh please, kind sir, lead the way,” Mina says, batting her eyes. I wink as I point to the stairs she’d already passed and start the journey to the depths of the building. Her grumbles fade away as the space between us widens.

I push the double doors open to find a human male hovering over a metal slab. Mina maintained her distance from me and became so distracted by a community board that I lost sight of her at the bottom of the stairs.

The man peels a sheet back to reveal the body that once housed Julie’s essence. I take in her pale, petite form, and the air rushes from my lungs. Death is not a comfortable part of werewolf culture. Unlike other supernatural counterparts, we celebrate life and the living and believe that death is a waste of a soul.

“I’m hoping you are the people I’m expecting. Otherwise, you are very lost down here,” the man tells me as he peers at me over the rims of his wiry specks. “I am Saul.” He glances over my shoulder with a frown. “I thought there were two of you coming. A vampire and a werewolf.” He assesses me, “You must be the werewolf. So, where is the vampire?”

“You are a *known* human?” I ask the man. “Who owns you?”

The man bristles as he straightens, pushing his glasses up his nose. “I am affiliated with the Emyr Pack. My grandfather is a pack member and an advisor to Galen Emyr.” I huff at the blatant namedrop of the man’s seat in the highest position of power in the shifter world. “I am the pack doctor

and assist where I am needed.” He firms his stance while ignorantly feeding me the lie we tell humans about the role they perform in our community. “The pack doesn’t own me.”

I hum my acknowledgement to soothe the growing tension without stating how naïve I find this man to be. This man can preach all he wants about affiliations with supernaturals. Still, the reality is that once a human is exposed to our world, they never get to escape it because they become either a commodity or a liability. The supernaturals who introduced them are wholly responsible for that human and their lives are as equally at risk for the behaviours of their human. It’s cruel that a blood relative would do this to a family member. Then again, anyone associated with Galen would need to be as ruthless as he is to maintain their position.

“It’s cute he thinks that,” Mina interrupts with a sweet, alluring smile. She saunters into the room and grabs disposable gloves as she passes them. Her steps slow as she closes in on the metal table. Her head lowers respectfully before her eyes build up the courage to look at Julie. I’ve only spent two nights with her; one of those was awkwardly perched on her couch with her creepy not-children watching television. Still, I’m coming to learn how to read her expressions. Her eyes flicker over the body, and this little spot in her brow crinkles. This bothers her. More than that, this death is weighing on her.

“Have you found anything new about her death?” I ask to redirect the conversation back to the reason we are here.

“Diagnosing what’s happened inside of her is impossible without an official autopsy and report. I’ve taken samples of all bodily fluids, as well as hair, nails and skin. Everything seems normal,” Saul says, taking a step back to allow me to approach and make my own inspection.

A thin papery dress keeps Julie’s modesty, but this examination still feels like a violation. She was healthy and vibrant. There shouldn’t be a reason for her to be pale and on this table.

“There was one thing that caught my attention,” Saul starts. “Wasn’t something I have seen before.”

“Yes,” Mina purrs sweetly while her eyes remain cold and detached.

“A couple of her hormone levels were unusually high. Unnaturally so.” Saul picks up a clipboard and flips through the pages. Mina’s head cocks to the side as she gifts him her undivided attention.

Biology of the human is not something I have bothered to spend time learning beyond that of common knowledge, so I'm not sure how relevant raised hormone levels could be. I'm not convinced that understanding the cause of her death will lead us closer to Griffin or the mystery shrouding the temporary invisibility. I'm starting to believe that Julie's case is an unfortunate crumb in a bigger case.

"Would those levels explain the bleeding from her ears?" I ask. I grab a pair of gloves from a counter behind me and slowly tilt Julie's head to the side to access her left ear before repeating the action to check her right ear. The blood that was there has been cleaned away, leaving only a slight trace deeper inside her ear canal. I gently reposition her head before stepping back, hands dropping to my side. Mina picks up Julie's left hand and inspects her fingernails. She shakes her head like whatever crosses her mind is instantly disproven before placing it back by her side.

"Honestly…" Saul replies, removing his glasses and leaning against the stainless-steel counter behind him. "I've never seen anything like it. The high doses could have caused her brain to haemorrhage. It is only a theory because I can't find any research to back the diagnosis."

"Which hormones?" Mina asks as she moves to inspect the other hand.

"Serotonin and Oxytocin," Saul hands me his clipboard with a bunch of names and numbers written that don't tell me anything I can use without further explanation of their means.

"Happiness and Sex," Mina says with a blink of surprise. "Julie is a victim of something tragic. I am not believing for a moment that she was happy with dying nor having the best orgasm of her life."

I pass the clipboard off to Mina, who takes her time to review it carefully. She takes out her phone and fiddles with it awkwardly before clicking photos of different pages.

"For Johannes," she tells me like I know what the male twin would do with that information.

Mina bends at the waist, her eyes closed, as her nose trails above the left side of her body. She straightens and takes a few steps back, shaking her head while seeming dazed. Clearly not scenting anything useful. I could have told her that since my wolf nose is far superior to her vampire one.

"Dead bodies," she shudders. "My senses are screaming at me to stay away."

“It’s a fascinating vampire trait. Remarkably similar to some human behaviours. We recoil when we see moulded or decaying foods. It’s our biological instinct informing us that it is unsafe to consume,” Saul explains, giving Mina a clinical examination. Anyone this closely situated to a wolf pack, like this doctor, probably hasn’t spent much time around other supernaturals. His curiosity is expected, yet so foolish.

“Well, I was once considered more human than vampire.” She bats her eyes before scrunching them up and shaking her head again. When her eyes open, her pupils are slightly dilated. There is a hint of fangs behind her lips.

Her hunger must finally be getting the best of her. It’s not an instinct I want to challenge in a species whose meals could easily lead to a loss of control. It’s time we leave.

“Mina?”

She holds up a finger to quieten me before sniffing Julie again. “Something is hiding underneath the death. It’s a little sweet. Syrupy.” Mina's eyes flutter as a soft, beautiful smile graces her features.

Curious, I lean forward and take in a large inhalation.

“I can’t get anything,” I say. “Are you sure it’s not a perfume or something? I haven’t detected anything outside the awful hospital chemicals and death.”

“There is definitely something in the blood.” Her sweet curling banana smile switches to cunning as her eyes flicker to her vampiric nature. They snap to Saul and glisten with a hungered desire.

“Mina?” I warn, slipping between her and the human.

Her eyes flutter, and the red snaps back to their natural icy blue. She gasps before holding her breath and shuffles away from Julie’s body.

“My hunger must be worse than I thought,” she whispers breathlessly while her hips sway to a missing tune. “I need to get out of here, August.”

I edge to block Mina completely from the human in the room. “My vampire colleague needs to retire for the day. Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“Not right now. I plan to run a few more tests before she is collected. If I learn something new, I will notify Fenris.” Saul’s words speed up as the meaning of our hurried exit dawns on him. His feet back up until there is a wall propping him up.

We say our goodbyes. Well, I do. Mina just rushes out of the room, flying quickly through the hospital until she is outside, gulping down fresh air.

"I need to feed." She types on her phone, and it dings in response immediately. "Thank the gods for my Greta. She has a blood bag for me at the apartment. Can you take me there?"

"Of course," I say, opening her car door for her. She trembles slightly on her feet before sinking into the passenger seat.

Chapter 10

Mina

I open the door to the new place I will be calling home for the foreseeable future and hum in appreciation. Greta did well. I never doubt her, and yet I am always surprised.

“Here,” Greta yells as a blood bag flies at my head. I snatch it out of the air and bare my fangs in her direction in displeasure. “Why are you throwing blood at me?” My annoyance drains away as I eye the meal side of the plastic.

She rolls her eyes. “There’s a microwave over there.” She points to a marble-lined kitchen at the far side of the open space. She throws something else at me, which I pluck from its trajectory to the back of my head. It’s a packet of pink musk sticks. My favourite sweet treat.

“Love you, Greta.” I twirl childishly and chuckle as I’m overtaken with the bliss of being home.

“Fuck you, Mina,” she replies, with grouchy hands on her hips and a thudding food. “You’re on my shit list right now.” She’s dressed in black from head to toe, her hair pulled in a slick back ponytail. She looks formidable, and it gives me chilling tingles.

I grab a glass, pour the blood, then place it in the microwave. While my meal heats up, I turn and lean back against the counter as I devour one of my special pink treats. My chewing slows as the bizarre silent standoff between Greta and August catches my attention. They look like two people fighting over a parking space.

Why does it feel like I am the empty spot?

I’m not sure why the werewolf followed me up here, but here he is, standing in the doorway of the apartment. Further dipping a toe past a boundary I don’t want him to pass.

Not even the microwave ding has them wavering from their posturing stances.

I grab the warmed blood and pour it into a mug before savouring the flavours of my life.

“You’re here,” Johannes says as he emerges from a steamy bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and another drying his hair. His arms stretch out wide to encompass me in a hug.

“Clothes.” My nose scrunches as I waggle a finger at him. He searches through a bag by the bathroom. By the time my glass is empty, he is dressed in a designer tracksuit. It’s the one that Greta bought for all of us for Christmas last year. Matching Christmas photos has become very important to her in more recent years, much to mine and Johannes's grievances.

Johannes rushes to me, wraps his arms around my shoulders, and his body hangs limp in my hold. “You okay, Johannes?”

He shudders and lets out a pained sob.

“It’s close to dawn. You both need rest. Take him to the bedroom. You can finish your meal in there,” Greta instructs as she meets my gaze over his shoulder. It’s been a long time since she’s played the role of the sympathetic sister. The emotion wouldn’t appear genuine except to those of us who know her well enough to see how she treats those she doesn’t care about.

I gently guide the twin in my arms into a bedroom. He finds a place to curl up on the queen bed. I chug the rest of my meal before I become the blanket around him, cocooning him in devotion and safety.

“Love you, Mina. I missed you so much tonight.”

“Love you, Johannes. Rest now, my darling. Light bleaches away the blemishes so we can thrive in the darkness.”

Chapter 11

August

“You can leave now,” the girl says, resting her hand on the open door to the apartment. Her other hand grips her hip, with her foot tapping like an agitated rabbit. The sky has begun to lighten and encroaches on the internal hallway I stand in.

I glance back to the lift that carried Mina and I up here, then at the door to the room where Mina has disappeared into with the sad twin.

“What is going on? Is he okay?”

“You’re missing a whole lot of background, aren’t you, sunny Jim?” Greta seems to have two gears, sincerity and sarcasm. She switches between them like traffic lights. So I wait for the mockery to pass before sincere flicks back on. “Are you going to hang out in my doorway all day? I have things I need to be doing.”

“Mina won’t say anything about your dynamic. Or the one with him. If I am expected to blindly follow her lead, I need to understand your relationship. She’s been sending you information all night. Yet you didn’t join us at Julie’s house or Headquarters.” I ignore her comment on my indecision to enter past the threshold because I know there will be no turning back once I take that step.

Greta shrugs and saunters to the fridge and pulls out a soda. A normal one, not any kind of vampire substitute.

“Our relationship is not your concern, Mr wolf. My brother, on the other hand, is an idiot. I am happy to bore you with his *tragic* tale since he deserves as much shame and judgement as possible.” Greta throws another soda at me, forcing me to enter the apartment. She assesses the different sofas in the room. When she’s satisfied with her choice, she slumps dramatically onto the seat and an accompanying sigh.

If this beverage is for me to consume, it’s now well-shaken and will explode if I attempt to open it. This must be the level of hospitality I am to expect from Greta, not that I expected anything at all.

I secure the door, latching a chain lock before moving to a wicker chair which creaks too much for my comfort. I settle in for whatever explanation Greta will give for the oddity I keep witnessing when interacting with this family.

"My brother has love *issues*." She sips her soda like she doesn't plan to say anything more. She flicks a few non-existent specks off her pants as her legs cross. The position exposes some black pumps with blood-red soles.

"Mina is his lover?" I ask, toying with the top of the can. That notion sits unpleasantly in my chest.

Greta points a finger in her mouth before making some gagging sounds, causing me to spring to my feet in concern.

"No! No. She's not… that's disgusting. Mina is ours. You know how it is for vampires?" She gives me a droll look when I remain unresponsive. "Do you not know? That seems stupid for the work you do. Actually, that is stupid for any supernatural. Ignorance always leads to death."

I lower myself back into the uncomfortable chair. Greta points at the plush grey couch that's opposite hers. It doesn't take much to convince me to move to the new chair that doesn't seem on the verge of buckling under my weight.

"Mina and I discussed this earlier. Johannes has a vampire bond with her," I summarise.

She hums like it is right, and also, very wrong. She sums it up simply. "Mina is ours. Both of ours." Her eyes flash red before settling back to their normal colour. "Our claim to her is equal."

"Okay, I'm confused. What is causing the tension between them? He looked like he was crippled in pain when she held him."

"When he is in mourning, Mina is the only one that can keep him from diving into the depths of insanity."

"Mourning? Who died?" My curiosity has gotten the better of me that I forget that the shaken soda can isn't safe to open. The moment the seal breaks, the sticky, sweet contents spray me in the face. The bottom of my shirt becomes a towel as I mop up the mess on my face and hands. Greta snorts, slapping a hand over her mouth, which does nothing to stop the laughter pouring from her.

"Oops! I don't know you weren't meant to shake carbonated drinks," she says, batting her eyes. I growl at her, which has the mocking

flirtation turn into petulance as her eyes roll. Something about her expression reminds me of Mina when she allows herself to enjoy banter.

“My brother, dear Johannes. He enjoys living on the edges of madness, so he forms bonds with humans,” Greta tells me.

“Bonds? Is that different to what you have with Mina?” I ask.

“Mina is our obsession. Our breath. Our reason to exist. We had no control over the connection that formed with her. These are like mate bonds that wolves form. Or soul connection,” Greta explains. A wolf mate bond isn’t entered into lightly and is not as common as it once was due to the devotion someone must have with their partner. If Greta is downplaying the seriousness of a mate connection compared to the bond between these three creatures, it must be intense and immensely overwhelming. No wonder no one really wants to talk about it.

“It’s a bond between a vampire and their lover. Wolves will perform a bonding blood ritual when they become formal mates. I guess there is something similar for vampires?” I ask.

Greta nods with a sinister grin that I am coming to realise is an ingrained part of her natural state. “It’s a slower process, but then one ritual, but a lot of blood is involved.”

“That’s…” I say, unsure how to finish the thought because it sounds as ridiculous as Greta hinted.

Bonding with humans isn’t common with the supernatural because rationale creatures would change or turn their lover, if possible, so they can enjoy the ages of the world together. Other long-lived creatures avoid the heartbreak of loving someone with a quick expiration date. Deliberately leaving them human… that’s the exception, not the rule. Not to mention that leaving them human makes them more likely to carelessly expose other humans to our world.

“Futile? Yes, it is. But it doesn’t stop him from doing it. He finds someone and drinks from them until a bond forms, all the while refusing to turn them into a vampire. They usually live happy lives together for a few decades. Some of his relationships are happier than others. But eventually, the human expires, and, well….”

“Part of the risk in creating a mating bond is that it usually kills the surviving wolf. I assume it’s the same for vampires… It’s an unnecessary risk for your brother to do that.” Especially if his life keeps Mina with the living.

“One day, his actions will be what ends him. While we have Mina, he is safe from acting on his grief because his connection with her keeps him from losing himself to his grief and meeting the sun. It usually takes a full decade before he is recovered enough to be the man we need him to be.” She hisses in annoyance. “Instead of staying a healthy vampire, the fool finds his next lover and starts the whole damn cycle again.”

“Could he drag Mina into his depression?” I ask, surprised at how agitated I am at that idea.

“Cool your jets, wolf,” Greta snaps, pointing a finger at me. “Mina is also *mine.* She will always be safe.”

The intensity of her words has me calming down. “Has he tried finding a less taxing hobby?” I ask, taking a sip of my soda.

“Teenagers are a sum of their impulse control.” She chuckles. Her drink sloshes in her hand, and it hisses viciously in response from within the can. “That’s part of the curse of being an immortal who never fully reached adulthood. We are stuck this way. Stuck dealing with influxes of puberty hormones. When we were still human, we were considered adult enough to marry and procreate. I have no idea how old we were when we were turned, but now we are considered exceptionally young to be immortals.”

I gape at her. I’ve never met an immortal child since they never survive very long. Their immaturity and lack of street aptitude quickly exposed them to humans. If the mod doesn’t kill them, those they risk exposing are there to deliver the final blow.

“The woman who turned my brother and I was mentally unwell. We never had the language we do now to describe her as sick. People called her crazy and possessed. The towns were terrified of her, but no one was brave enough to attempt to end her life. She was born with a power she didn’t know what to do with. The magic channelling through her corrupted and corroded her mind.” Greta smiles with this manic twinkle in her eyes as her red hair is curled around her finger. “She thought owning a set of twins would be a good omen. She captured us and kept us caged.”

I stand since being still is not an option, as thoughts of my past are triggered by this conversation. My legs need to stretch and move, so my steps turn into pacing. “Is it common for vampires to keep pets? Like how the fae do?”

Her brow crinkles. “What? No! She wasn’t a vampire. What the fae do is fucked up. Trading supernaturals like we are collectables and keeping their creepy as fuck menageries! There was a purge a while ago by the Guard to end the trade. Like all illegal things, it’s become even more secretive for those who still own collections.” Greta bristles, looking pissed. “A vampire bond, like the one we have with Mina, can be beautiful when it doesn’t end in the death of the person the vampire is obsessed with. Mina might disagree, but I wholeheartedly cherish my bond with her. It’s the most authentic type of love I have experienced.”

What a caveat. When it doesn’t end in death because the vampire can’t stop themselves from draining their bond dry until they are a husk.

“What happened to the woman who turned you?” If these twins are some of the original vampires, she must hold the answers to how we all came to be.

“She’s dead.” It’s stated like a cold hard fact. “She was burnt alive. It was grotesque how she screamed in her own oven right before we ate her fucking-gingerbread house. Her death actually started the rumour about my kind and fire. Then again, what person wouldn’t burn alive in a fire?”

“You did what?” I collapsed back on the chair, stunned.

“You should see your face.” Greta cackles with laughter.

“That was a joke? I’m so confused.” I run a hand through my hair.

“As if I am telling you, an unknown wolf, the origins of my kind. Or my very personal history,” Greta scoffs like I am a pathetic bug under her fancy shoe. She sets down her drink and leans forward.

“I’m sorry I asked,” I say quickly, letting the fizzy soda fill my mouth to stop me from speaking and asking more questions I will regret. I keep finding myself in these situations today. For someone who prides themselves on my ability to stay out of others' business, my nose keeps working its way into Mina’s.

My focus shifts to the door to the locked door of the apartment. It would only take a few steps to free me from madness following this family. Every time I try to leave, something here holds me in place, which is ridiculous. I haven’t slept in days. I am exhausted. I need a shower to wash away the grim and surrealness of these last few days.

Greta cocks her head to the side, examining me. “You don’t want to leave, do you?”

“I should leave,” I say, standing, even as my feet manage to grow roots to keep me in place.

“You can take my room.” She throws a thumb over her shoulder. “I’m not sleeping, anyway. I’m waiting for a response from one of Griffin’s contacts. Even before phones and letters were the height of communication, he was easier to find.” Her foot taps irritated on the carpet. “He’ll be in an obscure town in some tiny European nation that’s impossible to get to quickly.” She groans as she falls into the sofa. Two little feet are kicked up on the coffee table. “I swear he does this shit just to piss me off.”

As she rambles, I consider the offer of sleeping here. Just the thought of sleep has my brain wanting to turn off.

“You don’t need day sleep?” I ask as I edge toward the other bedroom. I push open the door and stare at the oversized, plush bed. The doona is folded like a present, waiting for me to unwrap it and dive in.

“Wolf, get some sleep. You’ve been awake for like two or three days by now.” Greta is tapping on the phone, dismissing me.

“Yeah,” I rub the back of my neck. “Maybe I should take a light nap here. I feel responsible for bringing Mina back in contact with the Guard. I should be close in case we need to move quickly.”

“Sure.” She’s annoyed again; a mobile phone is in front of her face. “Go to sleep.”

My feet obey her directions and shuffle into the room. My shoes are barely kicked off my feet before I’m under the covers, asleep.

Chapter 12

Mina

“Mina fucking Harker!” a gruff voice yells. “Where are you?”

There is hurried movement outside the bedroom. My eyes remain stuck closed, too sluggish to open. The sun must still be up otherwise my eyes would be snapping open to greet the evening. It takes several attempts to drag my eyelids up, and I blink until the room transitions from a blur to clarity. With my vision sorted, I direct my mind to force my body to climb from the comforts of bed and into the crackling fire burning outside.

“Fenris, you old cunt,” I hear Greta hiss. “Nice to know that you’re still a piece of shit. Why the fuck are you disturbing my family at this ungodly hour?”

Why is Fenris here? Making it to them before fists are thrown will be a miracle.

“I need to speak to Mina. I know she is somehow behind this,” Fenris growls before a thudding storm through the apartment.

“Fenris… what are you… Abby? What’s wrong with Abby?” August’s voice erupts from nowhere because he should not be here.

Did he not leave? What is going on? Usually, waking up isn’t so dramatic.

“What are you doing here, Andino?” Fenris snarls. A smack of dominant energy rages through the apartment, accompanied by a rueful chuckle from Greta.

“Calm down, Fenris. You will behave, or you can leave,” August growls.

Through the barrier of the dividing wall, the huff made by Fenris as he tries to curb his anger reaches my ears is surprising. My history with Fenris has been long, dark, and archaic. Threats and fights were the foundations of our relationship. His obedience to August’s demand is confusing and not something I have witnessed outside of the Galen Pack.

For a werewolf, he’s not all bad. He is proud of what he is and therefore carries the weight of values attached to it. I can respect someone

with morals. Wolves only get worse the further up the power ladder you climb. However, if you consider Fenris through the microscope of humanity and decency, he's a real piece of shit. A moody, emotional beta who wishes to be an alpha. If it weren't for his position in the Guard, he would need to be put down due to the danger he could represent to a pack's hierarchy.

"Andino, why the fuck are you here?" Fenris says through gritted teeth, trying again to get irrelevant answers. I'm more concerned about the reference to Abby and why he is barging into the same location as the twins. Why would he bring Abby to my home before sunset? That's unnecessarily exposing her to danger.

"You better get out there," Johannes grumbles, rolling over and placing a pillow over his head. "Greta will kill that asshole if he continues to piss her off. She is a tad more touchy than at the moment, given our state of affairs."

"Fine," I huff, knowing he is right. "I hate waking up early." My legs shift over the side of the bed, and my toes curl as they reach the carpet. I pull on the pants I wore last night and the sweater Johannes has discarded on the floor.

My shadows mimic my sleepy state when I call on them to cover me. They may be tired, but they still provide the appearance of strength. If someone wakes me early, I want them to experience my wrath.

I swing open the bedroom door, glaring at everyone on the other side. The glare doesn't last long when I find Abby's prone form lying on the sofa with a silly smile. She giggles like she's drunk while remaining mostly unresponsive, her eyes closed. August is kneeling on the floor beside her with her wrist in his hand, checking her pulse.

"What has she ingested?" I ask since that has to be the only explanation for the behaviour. The little I know about this woman gave a strong impression that she is a rule follower. Losing her mind to a vice doesn't seem like an activity she'd enjoy.

All supernaturals can be affected by alcohol or drugs. We just have to consume more to experience the same effects humans get. In the case of werewolves, they would have to drink bottles of vodka for Abby to be this inebriated. They run so hot it burns out of their systems too fast to experience the full effects.

Fenris spins at my appearance and stalks toward me. He's quick in his approach. I stumble into the corner at my back. There is barely an inch

between us as he uses his height to threaten me. His fists curl in my sweater as he pulls close so our breaths can mingle. “What was in the blood?”

I blink at that question in surprise. That’s the only reason I allow our proximity to remain.

“What blood?” I snap back into my body and yank Fenris's grip off me before throwing my shadows at Fenris. They blanket him, making him hiss in pain while cursing the ancestor of my shadow mage bloodline. He loses his balance as he tries to swat away my shadows. I take advantage and shove him away. When we have re-established a healthy distance, I call my little gems back to me to build my hood. My armour.

Greta moves from her position by the door. Her eyes burn with rage as long talons burst from her fingers, ready for death. It’s a bizarre contrast to the halterneck summer dress and wedges she is wearing this evening.

“Touch her again and you die, wolf,” Greta snarls around her fangs. August steps in front of her with his arms stretched. Fenris meets the challenge from Greta with his own defensive stance.

“Stop it,” August growls, turning his back to Greta and facing off with Fenris. “This is not a fight you want to have because I will not back you up. You can get the ass beating you deserve for disturbing sleeping vampires. You clearly came here for help. Stop with the theatrics and explain what happened to Abby. Why do you think this is a vampire's fault?”

“I didn’t know where else to take her,” Fenris grunts to August. They share a moment of understanding that goes right over my head. From the confusion on Greta’s face, she is equally perplexed why he’d bring the baby wolf here and not to a medic at the Guard. Fenris bristles. “I need to know what was in the blood,” Fenris says through gritted teeth. “The lab technician there said you scented something in her blood.”

“Julie’s blood?” I ask, coming to stand by Greta to soothe her frantic energy. At Fenris’ grunt, I shrug, “We know nothing more than what was written in the report. The human –”

“Saul,” August interrupts.

“– He said he’d send everything to you.” I glance at the woman, now lightly snoring on the couch. A beautiful smile touches her lips.

“Explain, Fenris,” Greta instructs, cutting through the bullshit. She takes the place where August was kneeling and gently strokes the she-wolf's head, now concerned.

Seeming to come to his senses and knowing his aggression won't get him whatever he wants, Fenris takes a deep breath to put his raging wolf to bed for good.

"Abby and I went to the lab where some of our people were running samples to see if there was anything more we could learn before the body was moved. *Saul* informed us about the high doses of hormones. When we arrived, one of our known humans was testing blood samples. Out of nowhere, Abby's eyes went strange. Her pupils dilated. She started giggling at everything I said. She was… flirting… with me." He shifts uncomfortably as he says that. I glance at Greta, who rolls her eyes, and I mime gagging. Flirting with Fenris is not something anyone would do unless highly inebriated.

"Then, she went rigid and collapsed," Fenris continues, running a hand down his scraggly beard. "I caught her before she hit the floor, luckily. But she's been in this strange unresponsive state with that god-awful smile and the occasional sigh or giggle."

"The blood had a high concentration of two hormones. A weird combo, sure, but not something that would cause her to lose consciousness. Has the little wolf ingested anything else that could cause this?" Greta asks, dusting herself off as she stands. She goes to the freezer and pulls ice from a tray, fusses with the ice before wrapping it in a hand towel and placing it on Abby's head. Abby groans as the ice touches her skin. The noise could make the most stoic person blush. She damn near orgasmed.

"Oh my!" Greta giggles. "It's been a long time since I've made a woman make a sound like that."

"It's the blood," Fenris growls, ignoring Greta and redirecting the anger to me like this is my fault. "Andino, you know that Abby isn't some ignorant fool who plays with mind-altering substances."

August's head slowly nods as he considers Fenris' statement. "Mina, when we were in the morgue, your eyes did something similar, and you started moving around the room with this swagger. And…" August clears his throat and looks at the ceiling. "You were flirty with Saul." August throws out that outlandish comment like he's dealing in facts and not listing disturbing behaviours.

"I was not… I do not swagger," I gape, flicking my mind back to the time in the hospital.

I rub my head because it suddenly aches the way it used to when I spent too much time playing with my Grandmamma's perfumes as a child. "I... Something doesn't feel right when I spend too long thinking about the morgue."

"What?" Greta snaps before appearing before me and prodding at my head. I try to smack her hand away when she lifts one of my eyelids. The violent hiss she makes turns me compliant under her touch. August takes advantage of the vulnerability by lifting my wrist and checking my pulse.

"They were blown wide," August explains, pointing at my eyes. "I thought it was Mina's hunger. There was a human there…so…" August says.

"So you thought I was flirting with a potential meal?" I growl, slapping Greta's hands away from my face so I can glare at the wolf.

Guilt is written on his face as his cheeks redden. "I didn't mean it that way," August says, rubbing the back of his neck and moving away from me.

"Wouldn't be the first vampire to play with its food," Fenris scoffs. "Are you all telling me that you don't know what's in the blood?"

"Apart from what we were told by the human, we know nothing else," August says, sitting on the couch that Abby isn't passed out on.

"That's not true," Johannes counters, causing everyone's head to jerk toward the wall he is propped against. He is dressed in tracksuit pants and remains topless since I am wearing the matching sweater. I'm glad Abby is unaware of his presence in the room since I doubt she could manage his magnetism with her flirty mood. Greta is an elegant beauty. She is a cherub and a tempting way to climb heaven. Dipping a toe in Johannes' world is like dancing with demons. It's a messy soul-destroying lust coated in all things decadent. It's tempting, and from what I've heard from others, sex with him is a path to depraved bliss. It's a shame that I find him repulsive for that kind of relationship. Otherwise, enjoying him may have helped the grief of losing my husband long ago.

"Nice of you to join us, brother," Greta says. She moves to him and gently kisses his cheek as he wraps an arm around her shoulders.

"Great, now we have the other one," Fenris spits out venomously.

"What were you saying, Johannes?" August asks with a touch of apprehension.

“You’ve inadvertently discovered that some poison, or drug, affects supernaturals when it is airborne because neither of the humans who have worked on her body was affected.” He looks at both wolves, who nod hesitantly in agreement at the statement. “There is one piece of information you are all overlooking.” Johannes kisses Greta’s forehead when she lays it on his chest. “It only affects females since these two men seem to be fine.”

“Yes, brother, that’s the obvious similarity between Abby and Mina,” Greta adds.

“It also seems to have an effect on a person’s memory. My bet is when this baby wolf wakes up, she won’t remember much of anything,” Johannes says.

Greta throws a thumb victoriously at her brother before frowning. “Why would a random human female, with no obvious connection to supernaturals, have some kind of supernatural drug in her system? One that clearly poisons our kind since these side effects are not the type of fun we usually look for.”

“Could this secret drug be what caused her death?” I ask, moving and sitting next to August. “The poor woman overdosed on something. I only smelt her blood inside of her body. Maybe that’s why my symptoms were milder. Fenris, you said they were testing her blood, so maybe Abby was hit with the drug outside the body, and it was let loose in the air.” I rub my head since the headache worsens with every attempt to recount the time at the morgue. “Are we assuming that Griffin has been developing this, or… maybe this has nothing to do with him, and we are dealing with a whole other villain.”

Greta breaks away from her brother and kneels by Abby, staring softly at the young woman. She’s acting a little protective of the unconscious wolf. Fenris sits in a strange wicker chair that makes an unsettling creak as it decides whether it will continue to support his weight. I subtly cross my fingers that the chair breaks, and the mutt’s ass becomes well-acquainted with the floor.

“I no longer care who is behind this drug. I want to know what is wrong with Abby,” Fenris growls.

Greta pointlessly presses her ear to Abby’s chest. “It’s healthy,” she says like everyone in the room can’t already hear that.

“Is that your professional opinion, Doctor?” Johannes chuckles. Greta flips him off without bothering to look at him.

Fenris leans forward. “Do you think she will be okay? Will she be able to sleep this off?” Genuine worry touches his stern features. I try not to enjoy his misery since it’s about Abby. Still, I won’t deny that his suffering warms the cockles of my heart.

“Wolves heal fast, not as fast as vampires, but still faster than most other species. My guess is that her body will burn the toxin off in a few hours. A full day at most. We should monitor her just to be sure,” Greta says as she tucks the loose strands of Abby’s blonde hair behind her ear. “Leave her with me. I’ll check on her during the night. It’s probably best if she isn’t moved too much. We also don’t want to accidentally expose someone else to whatever caused this reaction.”

When Fenris opens his mouth to object, Greta continues.

“My brother is here. If, somehow, this drug takes hold of me as well, then Johannes can help.”

Now I’m the one wanting to object. Greta is responsible. Johannes? Not so much. I’m eased by the intensity of Johannes as he nods his agreement with Greta’s plan. I’m not sure why I doubted him, even for a second. He may be irresponsible, but he is an unstoppable beast when it comes to protecting his family.

“Have you discovered anything new about the case?” August asks. This wolf is a great taskmaster, always keeping us on topic. Never letting us stray away from our task for long. He has also diffused a few situations with the same tactic. Clever wolf. Someone should give him credit for that.

Fenris leans back, which makes it creak more, arms over his chest. “I was told by the police contact we have that her boyfriend hasn’t been in contact with the family since her death. It was a throwaway comment, but they thought we might want to look into it since they aren't investigating anything as Julie’s death isn’t considered a suspicious death.”

“We know better,” I say, standing. “Do we have any details on the boyfriend?”

Fenris glances at Abby and sighs. “Abby was getting those details. I’ll make a call to our contact again.” He moves off the squeaky chair and storms out of the apartment.

I stretch my arms over my head and enjoy the pull on my worn muscles. “We are boyfriend hunting. I’m going to jump in the shower. I’ll be ready in twenty minutes, okay?”

“Sure. Twenty minutes,” August says, walking off into what must be another bedroom before I shoot a curious look at Greta.

“He’s still here,” I state the fact while also expecting an answer.

“He thought it would be best to stay close in case we got a lead on Griffin,” Greta tells the big fat lie, then smirks, knowing she’s been caught. “Go shower so you can catch the bad guys, and we can be done with these people.”

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“You didn’t need to come along,” Fenris grumbles as we enter the apartment building where the boyfriend, a human called Roland, lives. On the drive over, we briefed Fenris on what we suspected about the murder having some type of temporary invisibility. There is no point concealing it from Fenris now that we are certain this type of magic exists and we might be walking into a dangerous situation. I might hate the asshole, but not enough to set him up for an unfair death.

Fenris was surprisingly calm during the conversation. Though after several minutes of silence, he did punch a hole through the passenger side of the dashboard and released a string of curses that would make the filthiest of people blush.

“Of course, we needed to join you,” I snap. “Unless you have suddenly acquired the ability to see through magic that can cause invisibility.”

“You know we don’t work alone. You know this, Fenris. Abby is… she is the partner you were assigned.” They glare at each other. “Unless you want us to notify VH of your situation and the state Abby is in, we are accompanying you. Besides, this falls more under Mina and my area of the case. So we are taking this lead from here. You are the one joining us.” August steps between us to halt any brewing argument. I bristle since I was angling for another fight to curb my irritation that I have to scurry because their strides are much larger than mine. I refuse to use my vampiric speed to keep up with them, so I give up hurrying and slow to meandering behind August. Staring at his ass manages to cheer me up considerably.

I’m not one to fall over myself for an attractive man, but the jeans he’s wearing are a match made in heaven with his sculpted form. August

had already used the spare clothes in his go-bag. Since he had been in close contact with Julie's body, everyone agreed he should wear something new in case they were contaminated. Greta pulled some stuff from Johannes' selection of clothes. The male twin is not nearly as broad or tall as August, but Greta found items loose enough to fit him. What is baggy on Johannes is exceptionally tight on August. They expose just a little too much of everything, which emphasises how attractive this man is. It's distracting but not enough for me to consider voicing a complaint.

August adjusts the collar of his shirt, and I chuckle. The way he carries himself in the designer brands is fascinating. The man seems like he'd be more comfortable covered in troll slime than sitting down in twelve-hundred-dollar jeans.

"I am taking point when we enter Roland's residence," Fenris says, "His apartment should be on the third floor."

"The fuck you will, Fenris. Did you not hear what August just said? This is our case. Your part is done," I snap.

"And here I was hoping you'd matured in your absence." The grumpy wolf bares his teeth at me as he locates the stairs that will take us to level two. August sends me an exasperated look.

"You both need to cut this out," August whispers in my ear. "Make a truce or something for the rest of the evening because the moment one of you loses focus is when someone dies."

Those words have me reluctantly agreeing. "Fine!" I huff. "I'll play nice until we are clear of danger."

August nods like that is acceptable, and he leaves me at the bottom of the stairs as he jogs after Fenris.

When we reach the third level, August points at the numbers that lead to the boyfriend's apartment. Fenris glances at me. His gaze barely softens, though, in the case of Fenris, he might as well be a gooey marshmallow. "Please tell the Gingerbread-girl and that awful brother –" Fenris' face scrunches and looks like he is choking on the words. "– thank you for watching over Abby."

"Gingerbread girl… Oh? Because of the house in the fairytale," August snorts. His amusement ends the moment his smile meets my glare.

"If you're referring to Greta, tell her yourself, asshole," I hiss. Fenris smothers his laugh while August grumbles at me. I shrug.

“That was barely two minutes. What is it between you and him!” August whispers harshly.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I hiss, grabbing his arm to pull him to a halt. “Don’t think you’ve been subtle in advertising your dislike of him.”

“He’s closely aligned to the ruling pack. Therefore, I can’t trust him,” August says with a dose of added bite. They must have a sordid history to bring forth such an intensity in the usually steady man.

“It seems that our contempt for him comes from the same place. I detest those who have turned themselves into lapdogs of the Council, and that was before I was exposed to their betrayal.” I chuckle when I remember the main reason I hate Fenris. “Oh! And I’ve killed a few of his corrupt buddies over the years. That doesn’t usually breed love between people. I’ve always suspected that Fenris’ motives aren’t always as transparent. I’ve just never been able to prove it.” Those final words are muttered under my breath.

August raises a brow and shakes his head like he is willing himself to stop finding that amusing.

We join Fenris at the front door to Roland’s apartment. He softly tries the door handle. When it doesn’t open, Fenris takes out some picking tools. It takes several long seconds of jiggling the lock before it clicks and allows us to enter. Fenris glances back at us, and August and I nod in silent agreement that we are ready. Gone is the pettiness between rivals. What remains are three predators preparing for a hunt.

The door is pushed quietly open, and I manoeuvre to spy past Fenris and into the dark living space. It’s silent and eerily still. It’s becoming a frequent occurrence that my senses tingle with a warning that something is very wrong. I take a deep breath and notice a faint undercurrent of magic tainting the air. Usually, my body responds welcomingly to another magic user, wanting to seek out their power. Here, I just want to recoil.

“We’ve found the right place,” I whisper. “This human is either an extremely weak witch, or he has been dabbling where he doesn’t belong.”

Fenris takes the lead as we move further into Roland’s residence. The apartment is small, and from the real estate information we could find online, it’s a simple one-bed and bathroom. Fenris opens the first door in the hallway. It’s a small, untidy bathroom with the stench of toothpaste and stale water. Not something I seek out in a homey fragrance.

“Clear,” Fenris whispers as his wolf’s eyes flash forward, allowing him to see in the dark since his human eyes don’t have the same ability.

As a creature of the night, my vision is impeccable no matter how much of my vampirism I am evoking. I just need a moment for my eyes to adjust to the change in lighting from the bright hall to the dark apartment.

“From the floor plan, the next room will be his bedroom,” I whisper, keeping quiet like Fenris. “He could be sleeping.” It’s early in the evening, but who am I to question the sleeping habits of a likely murderer?

August squeezes my shoulder, recognising my warning, while Fenris nods.

Fenris turns the handle. It barely makes a sound before he pushes the door open to expose a room with clothes thrown carelessly on the floor and an unmade bed. The way the sheets are pushed back gives me pause. The television mounted on the wall causes light to flicker around the dark room as it plays a gory action movie. I move quickly to touch the dip in the middle of the mattress where a body has left a well-defined dent.

“It’s still warm. He’s here,” I mouth.

Both men straighten and take deep breaths, searching for a scent I know they won’t find. This will be exactly like Julie’s apartment, and I know for certain that this is the man with the answers to all of our questions.

“Wolves, watch your backs,” I call out, not bothering to hide our intention to Roland anymore. He is in here with us, and not knowing his location puts us all at risk. We crowd around the bed. It’s my turn to show these men why I am the one they send after the Invisible Man.

My shadows unfurl and search the room for the abnormal hiding from us. Fenris hisses in pain as my shadows pass him. August shudders. My target’s screams thrill me, forcing a course of adrenalin through my veins.

We spin to watch my shadows twirl in the air until the form of a man is built. They cover him completely. Tall, like I knew from the video, but not as wide as either of the wolves.

The man cloaked in invisibility is standing right behind August, arm raised, ready to inflict a punch to the back of his head.

“What have we got here?” I cluck, meandering up to the man who must be Roland. He tries to move, so I amp up the pain level my shadows

are causing. His knees buckle and take him to join the mess on the stained carpet.

Fenris shuffles away from us, and with the flick of a switch, the room is bathed in light. He joins August and me as we stare at the moaning form on the floor.

My shadows send me a reel of images that take me a minute to decipher. They don't know what he is. They don't like it and want to remove it from existence.

My head cants to the side. "I don't detect any magic on him. Not even this invisibility magic he is using. He feels entirely human to me," I tell the wolves.

"I only scent humans in this apartment," August says, crouching beside the whimpering red blob. "When I get closer to him, I can't smell anything at all. It's like an empty spot. I think this magic covers his scent, and what I am smelling is from before he took the magic."

Fenris grunts his agreement. "Explains why we didn't get anything worthwhile at the dead woman's place."

"What have you done to me, bitch?" the man finally speaks as his empty features turn in my direction. He sounds so normal that it's anti-climactic in a way. This man lying powerless at my feet has made us nervous and paranoid, and yet, he's just a nobody human who uses words like bitch, thinking that it will endear me to respond to him kindly.

Roland tries climbing to his knees while pretending my power isn't causing him blinding pain. He falls back to the ground as his body trembles and his chest heaves.

"August, find a chair to restrain him in. Let's move this party to the living area. This bedroom stinks of old deodorant and body odour. My nose can barely take another moment." I glare at the man at my feet. "You are one messy fuck."

Fenris grins like he just caught a rabbit with his teeth. "Off you go, little puppy, do your master's bidding."

August remains stoic with arms crossed, not moving to satisfy my instruction.

"Please, August," I say, gaining his attention. I place a hand on his arm and meet his gaze. August hesitates; his eyes flick between all of us in the room. He pushes past Fenris, shoulder-checking him on the way out.

Instead of the action causing a pissing match, Fenris surprises me by chuckling. Shaking his head like this is one giant joke.

“It’s cute how the packless mutt follows you around. You’d think the sap has a crush,” Fenris says with a taunting smirk. He comes up behind me, and the humour turns into a glare as he takes in the red mess rolling on the floor.

“He’s older than you, Fenris of the *Emyr Pack*. So, who is the puppy in this situation?” Not being able to stop myself, I keep poking. “Does it irk you that someone outside the Emyr Pack is more dominant than you? Galan has made it his mission to build a pack of dominate wolves.” I keep my eyes pinned on Roland. Fenris huffs, but it’s sweet, like the glee of someone taking their first bite of a sweet dessert.

“You have me there, mutant-vampire. He does cast a dominant shadow. No pun intended," Fenris points at the writhing man at our feet. “There is something I have been curious about.”

“Oh, pray tell because I’m fascinated by what tickles your fucked up mind.”

“Have you enjoyed reuniting with him?” he asks, ignoring my sarcasm.

“I…” I pause, taken aback. Emptiness floods my mind where any memory of August could be.

I wouldn’t forget working with August before, would I?

August is not someone who is easily forgotten. He was not a Hunter for the Guard when I was decades ago, and I don’t recall any reference to him before then. Johannes mentioned that he has a notable reputation for taking down fae acting outside the law. That reputation only goes back a limited amount of time, which is baffling when you consider how old the man must be.

“In the short time I have known August Andino, I have come to like him a lot more than I have ever tolerated you.” I finally let my eyes leave Roland and give Fenris my undivided attention. “Don’t pretend to be brave when you clearly have forgotten who I am, Fenris. Be brave when you genuinely want to come toe to toe against me. Now, help me move him.”

“Forgive me, Mina. I meant no disrespect.” The wolf bows mockingly. “I must be mistaken about your past with August.”

He is as transparent as a sinner on Sunday. The worst part is that I can’t figure out what he is trying to achieve with his provoking or why he is

being underhanded.

I retract my shadows and allow Roland a moment to reclaim his dignity before it's robbed from him again. Fenris grabs his legs and drags him out of the room. Roland struggles against Fenris' grip, so I grab one of his arms to lift him off the ground.

August joins us and takes Roland from me so he and Fenris can secure him to the chair with zip ties. They step back, and the three of us become a wall as we stare down at the helpless human.

"Let's start this with an easy question. A warm-up," August says. "How long does the invisibility last?" August glances at me. "It is disconcerting to talk to someone when you can't see their face."

"The lack of eyes also adds a layer of creepiness," I say. "So does the fact that he is not wearing any clothing right now." Both men scrunch their faces up. They hadn't realised that his family jewels are hanging free.

"I'm not telling you shit," Roland says through pained gasps, still recovering from my magic hits. My eyes roll at how cliche this guy is. He's been watching too many action movies if he considers himself a genuine tough guy who can withstand our means of persuasion.

"Fenris," I purr, gifting the grumpy wolf a sly smile. "Do you know how I used to keep Griffin in line?"

He shrugs with an unnatural innocence. He strolls around Roland and settles on standing in the intimidating position behind the invisible imposter. August finds a place by the window to lean and glances into the evening darkness caressing the sky.

"Well…" I drawl, my toes dragging with each slow step I take toward Roland's tied-up form. "Like all magic users, my shadow magic can wear me down if I exert too much power too quickly. Even if I am careful, all magic users need time to rest and recover. This weakness is easy to exploit for someone as crafty as Jack Griffin. He would play games with me to exhaust me before escaping my attempts to capture him." I pause to build some dramatic effect. "Being the intelligent, unstoppable, and overachieving person I am, I discovered how to weaken him while also saving my magic reserves. Fenris, are you curious to know how I did it?"

"Do tell, little mutant," Fenris chuckles, enjoying himself.

I step closer until my face is next to Roland's ear while maintaining eye contact with the delighted wolf.

“Blood,” I whisper. “The key to everything always lies in the blood.” My fingers glide through Roland’s hair. At the last moment, I grab a handful to keep him steady. “I need a knife,” I call over my shoulder. August moves from his perch. Metal sings as it’s dragged from a block in the kitchen nook.

August places the blade in my waiting palm before I show it off to Roland. His hairline is my target, and I make a paper-thin cut from ear to ear.

Roland screams.

Fenris laughs.

August remains blank.

The scent of the blood is delicious, and my fangs ache as they peek through my gums to join the horror show I’m creating. The blood starts as a deep red line, and then it begins to trickle, pooling around his features.

August grunts when I move to make another cut lower on his face.

“Problem, August?” My knife runs down Roland’s cheek. The cut floods before swimming to join its counterpart from the forehead wound. Roland’s nose takes more of a shape under the coating of blood. It’s disgusting and messy, but it worked when Griffin didn’t play nice by wearing clothing.

“Just never been a fan of creatures who play with their food,” August says.

Those words sting. My hand with the knife drops to my side, and my other releases my hold on his hair. I step back, blinking at the bloody knife in my hand. “And there is a difference between this and roughing him up?” I counter.

“Fair point. Ignore my interruption,” August says, without realising that his damage is done.

Why does his comment feel like a judgement when I used to be praised for being ruthless? It became part of my core beliefs and how I acted toward all who stood in the way of getting what I needed.

“That ain’t food, August. That’s a murderer right there,” Fenris replies. “If you’re too weak in the stomach to be here, leave. Mina and I will collect the answers we need.”

Fenris is right. So is August’s judgement.

I think.

I don’t know anymore where my morals lay when it comes to past actions. The woman in the red hood. The Huntress. I killed at the direction of a corrupted leadership. That Mina quieted the dissenters who would stop the progress and agenda of the Council. She also punished those who needed it, but in hindsight, more punishments were shaded in grey, not black and white.

This human male is tied to a chair and is defenceless as I maim him. Does the end justify the means… I don’t know anymore.

The knife slips from my fingers and clatters to the floor. August catches my gaze, walks up, and collects the weapon from the floor.

He cups my chin. “Fenris is right. We are here for answers that could lead us to a more troubling tale. Do what you must to get answers for Julie – for anyone who would be a target for this magic. We have found ourselves at the right place, with the right person. We must act. If he won’t offer answers, you need to extract them.” He places the knife back in my hand while continuing to cradle my cheek. His hand forms a fist around mine, securing my hold on the blade.

“This is who we are, Mina Harker. We do what we must to keep others safe. We are Hunters. The boogeymen to warn children about,” he whispers.

“Bogeymen,” I say quietly, stepping back from the man crowding my space.

I block out the doubt and focus on the present. This isn’t the time to deal with all the emotional baggage hanging over my head. This is about Julie. This is about helping Abby. This is about keeping our community safe.

“Are you done with the emotional support shit? If you cannot do this, Mina, I am more than happy to leave my own marks on this human,” Fenris says, gripping Roland’s shoulders.

I step forward to face the male withholding the answers. I lift the blade to make another cut. This time I make my mark across his collarbone. Blood dribbles down the curves of his pectorals and down his stomach. The chair at his back fades from view as Roland’s form solidifies and returns to the land of the seen.

Knowing what is about to be exposed, I march into the kitchen and grab a tea towel. I throw it over Roland’s lap so none of us have to maintain

a staring contest with men's pitiful justification for being the more dominant sex.

"So this is how we quickly end the magic," August says, stepping up behind me.

"The key always lies in the blood," I reply, repeating my previous sentiment. "Welcome back, Roland. Are you willing to talk now, or should I keep cutting? We don't have all night," I say, waving the blade around.

"Alright, alright!" Roland groans. "I'll talk to him." He nods his head toward August. He has picked the person he thinks will be the most sympathetic here. I'm not sure where August sits on that scale anymore, so I'm as eager as Roland to see at what point his compassion is overruled by impatience.

I sigh and slowly step back. "Time may pass and promises of revolutions are made. Yet, this male chauvinistic shit never changes."

"How did you get this ability?" August asks, ignoring my huffing as I perch in his place by the window.

Before closing his eyes, he checks the room like there could be prying ears. "I manage security for a local coven. IT, like cameras, automation, and security personnel, when they need them for big events."

I stop myself from moving forward and taking control of the questioning and let this play out for now.

"How does managing security lead to you gaining a skill to turn invisible?" August asks, grabbing another chair and setting it in front of Roland. He sits down, and his body language tells the human that he has all the time in the world to wait for what he wants.

"They needed someone to test some of the products they'd been making. I volunteered when they agreed to slip me more cash every time they needed me to try something."

"You didn't volunteer; you were paid," I snap. August shoots me a glare, so I seal my lips.

"I needed the cash." Roland shrugs. "Vizzy is one of their latest." He shifts in his chair, his arms tugging on the zip ties. "Can you loosen these things?"

"Vizzy?" I mouth, and August coughs to hide his amusement at my disgusted expression.

"What does it do? This Vizzy?" Fenris asks, tightening his grip on Roland's shoulders.

“If you won’t loosen my wrists, can I at least have something for the bleeding? I’m feeling a bit light-headed,” Roland says. August cocks his head like that question has taken him off guard while Fenris laughs under his breath and removes his hands from him.

“I want to know what the invisibility does,” August says, ignoring the request.

“Makes me invisible.” Roland dares to look at August like he is an idiot.

“He means, what are the parameters of the spell, smart aleck,” I snap, hating the disdain dripping off the man who should be more scared at being in a room with us.

“Parameters?”

“How does it work? How long do the effects last? How do you activate it?” I move from the window and stand over August’s shoulder. “If you keep mouthing off to my partner, I will summon my shadows to play some more.”

“I like this side of you,” Fenris hums approvingly.

“Shut up, wolf,” I hiss back at him. “You’re permanently on my shit list, and I’m done pretending to be nice to you,” I growl, frustrated. “August, get him to talk. I need to understand what role magic users have in this mess. If a coven of witches is involved, this could become much bigger than anticipated.”

“You’ve pushed her patience enough, Roland. I’d start spilling guts before I give her back the knife, and she uses it to spill your guts.” The words send chills down my spine. Fenris bristles at the wave of alpha dominance that August fills the space with.

Roland stutters and shakes as he crumbles to the reality of his situation. “They have been working on it for years.”

“I need names, Roland,” Fenris says. The human weeps and shakes his head.

“I can’t. They’ll kill me,” he whimpers.

“Fine. Forget the names. Tell me everything else,” August prods, subtly gesturing to Fenris to remain quiet.

“They sent people all around the world looking for something… They never said what. One day I was escorting their –” He coughs to cover his near slip of a name. “– someone to an event. They received a call in the car. I haven’t seen them so excited. After that, things progressed much

faster with the development of Vizzy. Another guard told me that the witches even employed a special scientist to help create the serum. Whatever they found overseas must have been a big deal, right?"

"Sure," August says, "How is the magic activated?"

Once Roland's mouth opens, it spills everything he knows about the invisibility magic and how Julie fits into the picture. She was a caterer they used when hosting meetings, and she provided the coven with some of the fresh produce they needed for spells. That information aligned with what we found at her home.

"We need to revisit her finances and any invoices she has for a link to this coven," I say.

"Abby and I were looking into that," Fenris replies, frowning. "All the businesses she recorded in her books are human-owned. We did find some substantial deposits in her bank account. However, they are all cash, so completely untraceable."

"They only deal in cash or other untraceable payments. I was setting them up to invest in crypto…" Roland trails off when he realises this isn't what we want to hear.

I slip my phone from my pocket and open my notes application to remind myself to ask Johannes what crypto means. I still need to save some face after the laughter I got about my computer knowledge.

"So, to summarise," I say, counting everything off on my fingers. "This Vizzy is an injectable. It takes effect almost immediately once it's in the bloodstream. It can last up to an hour, but that has been unpredictable."

"We learnt here that the time can be considerably reduced if the person with the magic loses a lot of blood," August adds.

"He doesn't know anything about how the effects might be different if used by a supernatural," Fenris says, leaning on the wall behind him.

I glare at Roland, realising he knows nothing helpful that we couldn't have guessed. "You said that you don't know anything about how Vizzy is made except that they might have employed a special scientist. Whatever that means…" I turn my back on Roland and stare at August. "I still don't understand how these witches are doing it. And there is no answer to why they would bother spending so much time making something like this. What's the end goal? Is it just to sell this serum that makes you temporarily invisible, or is this a small plot in something more sinister? I assume the purpose is to sell it on the black market." I rub my brow.

“Anyone wanting to get around invisible is automatically classified as threatening. What we are missing from this puzzle could fit an entire country.”

“You were careful to avoid telling us who these witches are,” Fenris says. “I’d respect it if we were sitting on the opposite side of justice.”

“They will kill me. My life will be forfeit if I reveal that,” he repeats again, and I shoot the man a humorous look. He’s been stating that on an endless loop. He’s been exposed to our world, so by the laws of the local ruling family and Council, his life was void the moment he was caught. To some, these experiments could be considered an act of war against our rulers.

“Tell me about the drug you dosed Julie with,” August says.

“It’s meant to –” Shame overwhelms his body, he curls over, his heart races, and eyes become watery. In normal circumstances, anyone displaying this level of emotion would encourage empathy from me, even sympathy. This man is too far down the road for redemption in my eyes. “I loved her so much. We have been dating for years. I was going to ask her to marry me…”

“That doesn’t answer August’s question,” I snap.

Roland sighs and shakes his head. “It’s called Enhancer. It’s meant to overcome rational thought and make a woman easily persuaded to a thought or idea… they might normally say no to.”

My eyes bug from my head.

“What in the gods’ names is this kind of magic?” I gasp. It takes everything in me not to slap the spit out of this man.

August runs a hand down his face and stares out the window. “It only affects women. Why would they add that specificity?”

“I know why,” I growl. “Was Julie not submissive enough for your ego to handle, you son-of-a-bastard?”

“Julie hated that I was trialling the witches' magic. Said it was changing me. I don’t know why, but she suddenly stopped working for them. Then she calls me and tells me she’s ending it and not to call on her again… She was becoming so paranoid. That’s why I even bothered taking Vizzy when I went to see her after my evening shift. I texted her. She knew I was coming over.” He scoffs as his bare foot kicks the ground. “One of em’ witches were telling me about Enhancer and how it could persuade her

to… ya know… want me again. It's just like Vizzy. You inject it into the body."

"How much did you give her? Did they warn you that it could kill her?" August asks, leaning forward.

"Erm…The witch, he never told me the right dosage, so I… I gave her all of it."

"You didn't know? So you just gave her all of it?" I snarl. "You killed her with your idiocy!"

August flaps a hand in my direction, instructing me to shut up.

I want to break his hand, so I take a deep breath to temper my rage and allow August to continue his questions without my interjections.

"Is there an antidote for someone after they have been injected? Are the effects permanent? Would she always have been under your influence?" August asks. "If it's like Vizzy, it should wear off after a while. Or if you were bled enough to weaken the spell." August glances at me with a questioning brow.

I hiss at the thought of making Abby bleed to remove this manipulative poison from her body. If she shows no sign of improvement, then I will tell the twins to open a vein.

"Abby will be fine with a full day of rest," Fenris growls, noticing the silent conversation between August and me.

"Who is Abby?" the idiot tied to the chair asks as he tries to face the wolf at his back. Fenris smacks him up the back of the head, which works at shutting Roland up.

"Why was Julie's home such a mess? Was she bad at housekeeping?" August asks.

"What do you mean? Julie's home was always tidy. It was one of the reasons we hadn't moved in together. She's very particular about her stuff."

"Her bedroom looked like it had been torn apart," I counter. "So what were you looking for, Roland?"

Roland looks between us, his face written with confusion. "I… I didn't go into her bedroom. I called out her name when I entered the house. She knew I was coming, so it was open for me. We spoke in the living area. She was crying and upset. I thought that maybe I could use the Enhancer to calm her down –" I huff, not believing a word of it. "– When she went to get us drinks… that was when I… and she…" Roland looks at his knees as

a tremble moves through him. “She died in the kitchen. I tried to revive her, but I panicked and left her there.”

“How noble of you,” I scoff.

“Are we assuming that Julie left her room in that state or that someone else did that after her death?” Fenris asks, looking between August and me. “Why would anyone bother to ransack the human's house when she obviously had nothing of value?”

“If she was an employee of these witches, maybe someone came looking for any information that could identify them,” I pose to Fenris. He nods as he considers the point. I stare out the window as puzzle pieces fall into place. “Roland, who did you call once she was dead?”

The human just shakes his head. He doesn’t reveal anything, but that movement does.

“These witches really don’t want to be identified,” August says. “And they have two very powerful potions,” he adds more to himself. “Do you really think it is witches behind this? They aren’t known to rock the boat like this. Maybe he’s ignorant and doesn’t understand the difference between a witch and a mage? New wolves can struggle to tell the difference until they can compare the feel and scent of different types of magic.”

Roland's face scrunches, causing more blood to break through his drying cuts. His confusion confirms August’s suspicion.

“Do you know for sure they are witches?” I ask. When Roland shrugs, I explain the difference between these magic users. “Witches use external magic, like taking from the elements. Mages are born with internal magic. They don’t need spells or potions to activate their magic.”

“Witches…” he says slowly. “’Em was witches. I’m pretty sure of it. They chant together with lots of items around them. They call themselves a coven.”

“That does sound like witches,” I nod, though still not confident.

“Do we need anything more from the human?” Fenris huffs, clearly losing patience with all of this. He kicks off the wall and stands over the man.

“Do you have any of the potions here?” August asks.

“No, I… I used ‘em all up,” Roland stutters, glancing at Fenris over his shoulder.

“Can you get us more?” August asks, shifting slightly forward on his chair. Roland’s eyes dart up to the ceiling as he tries to find an adequate

lie.

“He can’t get us anymore because he stole them,” I summarise. Roland blanches but doesn’t deny it. “No wonder they didn’t tell you how to use the Enhancer drug on Julie. Thieves don’t get instructions.”

“That’s why they will kill me if I find out I’ve spilled so much.” His pleas don’t land any compassion from me. “I wasn’t meant to remove any from their lab.”

And their labs would be?” I ask coyly. Roland’s lips become a straight impenetrable line. I shrug. “Had to give it another try.”

“Fenris, do you have access to the location of any local covens? I’d prefer not to make a formal request to the Council until we have something more solid. I’m not willing to make any accusations against any supernatural group for such an egregious crime without more to up the case. People have been killed for much less. I don’t want them to kill me before I get the answers I want.”

“Your attitude towards our rulers is going to get you killed, little mutant,” Fenris says. I wait for him to answer my question. Fenris purses his lips as he speaks. “It’s hard to know unless you are… in the know. It’s not uncommon for covens to have several names. Ones they disclose to the supernatural world for their legitimate business and others they use for illegal activity. I will look into registration lists because council law still requires covens to register their covens and details of long-serving members. This is definitely illegal activity, so no one is going to be forthcoming, so I might need to apply for a surveillance operation to be undertaken on all the local covens in Ashford and the wider area.”

“Are you sure you won’t tell us where your witches are?” I purr, moving closer to him. I run my finger through the drying blood on his cheek.

“They’ll kill me,” he whimpers.

I nod and withdraw from him. My eyes close, and I swallow hard. “Fenris, make the call for a clean-up crew.” I march out of the apartment and into the dim hallway outside. I round a corner and slip down the wall until my ass smacks the ground.

“Greta,” I sob when she answers my phone call. “Where is he? Where the fuck is Griffin?”

“I don’t know where he is, Mina,” she replies softly. “No one has heard from him in months. He has been unusually silent. Are you okay, my

darling? What's wrong."

If I speak, there will be no hiding the tremor in my voice. Silence will have to be my language because any waver in strength will set my protective vampire off in a rage.

"You don't have to do this, Mina. We can leave. This time we will disappear and live the lives we've always wanted. Johannes can find his lovers and be happy with them. You can just exist without fear. Maybe even find your own lover. I can get a hobby or something. I could learn to bake and make sourdough. Life could be nice."

I choke on a laugh as it forces its way out of me. "I can't. You know I can't. We have to keep moving forward. I can't keep letting these people control me. We gave them too much power over us, Greta." I give up hiding my emotion and let her hear my pain.

"Why… Why can't we just go?" Greta is nearly begging me even though she knows it's in vain.

When she found me locked away in that dungeon all those years ago, she knew that my death would only be the service of taking out the man who put me behind those bars. It was only a matter of how much time. We spent a long time hiding while they waited for me to choose my course of action.

What I didn't realize, until August Andino came knocking on my front door, was that I never had a choice. I was always going to come back to finish this fight. No matter the odds. Even if I end up chained to another fucking stone wall, waiting to be Dracula's next meal. Greta might hate this constant need to fight simmering in my soul, but it is also part of the reason she and Johannes fell into obsession with me. They watched me from the dark corners of my prison, never intervening in my punishment. They watched with sick fascination as I refused to die at my tormentor's hand. I should hate them for not interfering, but that's never been our dynamic. They don't get in my way. They just remove the obstacles to clear the way for my next target.

Right now, my target is Griffin and these witches.

"It has to be Dracula behind this mess." I ruffle my hair, sighing as I snag on a knot in my ponytail. "I don't know how. I don't know why, but this reeks of his chaos. He's been back for a long time. Finally it feels like his plans are in motion, and we won't know anything until we are right where he wants us."

And that’s always too late.

“I knew this was about more than just saving fables. You are finally going after him,” Greta says with a heavy breath. “You’ve decided.”

I know she is sitting on the floor in the same position I am in. There is something in our bond that tells me these types of things.

“This will kill you, Mina. You may even take my brother and I with you. We will finally have to face our mortality. The final death.”

“Sometimes that doesn’t sound so bad.” I swallow back another sob. I won’t deny that I might take them down with me. That’s the risk of forming a bond. “I love you both so much.”

“Love you too,” Johannes calls from a distance. I knew he’d be close by, always in earshot. His voice relaxes me a little, knowing they are together. My head drops to my knees as I take deep breaths and remind myself of all the reasons to live.

What surprises me most are the two wolfish eyes glaring back at me in my mind, demanding me to give him a chance.

Chapter 13

August

Rounding the corner, there she is. Head between her knees on the ground. Bordering on having a panic attack.

Weak.

It’s not safe to be weak so openly like this. This woman was once considered the most infamous huntress. Someone who could go toe to toe with VH and the Council and come out on top. Now she is likely to be as scared of her own magic shadows as the rest of us are.

My mind flicks back to being inside the apartment and how I’d easily shattered her confidence with a thoughtless comment. That comment had her riding uncertainty for the rest of the night. Anger, despair, hesitation. She needs to learn to guard her emotions better. I now know if she wants me as her partner, I need to do more to protect her because she is not match-ready. It’s no longer about the strongest person in the room or the one with the most influence. It’s more than that. It's technology, resources, and networks. It has only been a few decades out for her, but our community has come a long way since the days of only relying on brute force. Even the Council doesn't sit as comfortably as they used to and is careful how they throw around their power. They are undermined and challenged in subtler forms.

That doesn’t mean that it’s less effective.

“Get up,” I growl. Mina’s head shoots up, and bleary red eyes meet mine. I check the hall before scooping her up and returning us back to the car as fast as I can.

I juggle her awkwardly as I open the passenger side of the door before placing her on the seat.

Kneeling beside her, I snap, “You can’t let them see you like this.” The crimson rings and the faint salty lines trailing from her eyes remind me not to be harsh with her.

She needs you to be soft until she can be hard.

I run a hand over my jaw, scraping my overgrown facial hair. I can't linger on how that sensation bothers me. I've been denied the privilege of being clean and surrounded by filth for too long I want to consider. I was only allowed to wash and cut my hair on special occasions when I needed to present an image of ferocity for my master. With my secured freedom, cleanliness is not something I ever want to lose again. So cases that keep me moving start to chafe on that freedom. As always, I block out the feeling and focus on the now and what I can change.

"Council! Griffin! And every other supernatural is watching you, Mina Harker. You are the thing everyone wants a piece of. People will tear you apart because they will sense a new weakness in you." I cup her chin. Something changed in our dynamic during this last night together. My confidence in our relationship has grown to the point of not fearing losing a limb for touching her. "Don't let them see you fail."

"So… No crying? No emotion?" she says with a bite that can only belong to Mina. It makes me smile.

I gently guide her face to meet mine, and she doesn't resist.

"You can cry, Mina. Just remember who you can be vulnerable around. Fenris will eat you alive, and so will every other member of the Guard who sucks the teat of the Council. You know this. You know who he is loyal to."

"Are you saying you're safe?" she scoffs, finally shoving my hand away.

"Yes. Whether you want to believe it or not, I want you to come back and kick some ass and shake things up a bit." *Or a lot.*

"Why would a werewolf want *me* back?"

"I have my own reasons," I reply, ignoring the jab about her past with my species. Just because I am a werewolf does not make me unconditionally loyal to them. "None of that matters right now. Look at what is happening here. Maybe these witches wouldn't be so bold if they knew you'd be the one knocking at their door." She remains sceptical like she was when we met – I don't even know how many days ago now. It's all a blur now. I go out on a limb and give her something else. "There are things VH hasn't told you."

She snorts. "Tell me something I don't know. That man is all secrets and no tact."

I nod my head, glad we are on the same page. I lean across and grab a tissue from the glove box. “Clean your face. I’m going to let you have a moment. Then we are heading back to headquarters to search for this coven.”

My serious façade cracks when she mouths a “Thank you”.

I stand, dusting my knees off before closing the passenger door and moving back to the entrance of the building.

Fenris storms out, scouting the dark street. His eyes glide straight over me as they find something in the distance. Headlights appear on the quiet street.

“Clean up is here,” he says as he approaches me. “Mina?”

“She’s making a call,” I reply.

“Is he dead?” I ask, not taking my eyes off the approaching vehicles.

“I’ve done the deed neither of you could. You, I understand. You’ve always been delicate about getting your hands dirty.”

I can’t stop the low growl vibrating in my chest.

“Her? This was her bread and butter.” He shakes his head in disgust as a van parks behind our car. “I tried to keep it tidy, but she had already made such a fucking mess of him. There is blood all over his rug.” Fenris runs a hand down his shaggy beard before glaring at the building. “I was worried she’d turned soft. She heard the name Dracula, tucked her tail between her thighs and ran. That show upstairs… she’s still fucking hard as nails and a complete fucking psycho. Cold, hard, mutant bitch.”

I almost react by grabbing his throat but stop myself from lashing out at the mutt. When working with Fenris, I have to remember how close he is to power. Galen Emyr already wants me dead since he couldn’t convince me to join his pack and build his power. The wolves in charge seem to live by the adage that if you can convert them, kill them.

Four supernaturals climb from the vehicle and walk toward us. Two shifters, a fae, and likely a witch. Mina opens the car door and joins us. She acts bored, like none of this phases her. She pulls it off, too, because if I hadn’t just witnessed her lapse in emotional control before, I wouldn’t believe it had ever occurred.

“We will take care of this, sirs,” the little fae woman, a brownie, bows at the waist at Fenris and me. I nod in acceptance of her polite gesture. As she addresses Mina, she tenses and unabashedly gapes at her. “And… ma'am,” she squeaks before dashing inside. The other magical

female follows her, only pausing to give us soft, genial smiles. The werewolf respectfully bows to Fenris as he passes. I scent the other male and determine that he is a forest creature – likely a bear, due to his towering size. The bear ignores Fenris, making me grin. Wolves are species that have managed to secure power holds across the world. Our numbers are insurmountable compared to other shifter types. That imbalance has led to most shifters hating and resenting us. The final insult is that there is only one official seat in the Council that covers all shifters. The seat has only ever been sat on by a wolf.

When subtle politics are used to disrespect Fenris and metaphorically kick him in the balls, it stokes the fires in my gut.

Fenris bristles at the disrespect; for once, he stays calm and doesn't indulge his feral instincts and lash out. After a moment and a few calming breaths, he moves to join the clean-up crew.

"Fenris," I call. He halts, sending me a glance over his shoulder. I decided to be courteous since he did, after all, allow us to join him here. He didn't deceive us with his intentions. "Mina and I will go to HQ to build a list of covens to investigate. Call me if you find anything that might help us when you search his belongings."

Fenris glances at Mina, who becomes a statue at my side. "Have you spoken to the devil spawn? Is Abby okay?"

Mina ignores the jab. A tingle of joy hits at the idea that Fenris is so petty that he will not openly say Greta's name.

"Greta has been texting updates. Abby woke up dehydrated. They fed her a light meal, and now she's sleeping again. You can check on her when you're done here if you feel it's necessary." Mina pins Fenris with her icy eyes. "No one will begrudge you for being concerned for the young wolf."

"I'll stop by after I brief the clean-up crew. Then I'll join you at the office." It is synchronized as they walk away from each other. Mina climbs back into the passenger seat. She waits for me, ramrod straight and gaze locked on the empty road. She stays that way even after I claim my own seat.

"Back to HQ," I say, driving away.

"Sure," she replies with no emotion. Though she is strangling the seat belt.

“You don’t need to feel self-conscious. I’m not going to hold it against you that you had to take some time to process your feelings,” I say, turning onto the freeway.

“I couldn’t care less about your thoughts, especially regarding me.”

Her fidgeting tells a contradictory story. I let the topic drop, and we make the drive in silence. It doesn't escape my notice that those blue eyes track me for the rest of the journey.

Chapter 14

Mina

My pen taps frantically on the desk. Only an annoyed sigh from August has it stopping mid-swing.

“Sorry,” I mumble. That’s the fifth time I have apologized to him since we arrived at HQ. The conversation we had in the car was August’s attempt to inspire me to strength. Instead, he has turned me into a giddy child with lace bows tied to the ends of her pigtails. That is not the image of terror and dominance I hoped to maintain. I doubt that even a power pose could help me recover from this misstep.

“We will find this coven.” August tries to smile though the expression could be better categorised as a grimace. “Greta located Griffin yet?”

“Not since the last time you asked me an hour ago,” I snap, frustrated. “Sorry,” I mumble, rubbing my forehead in defeat.

And there is apology number six.

“It’s getting close to dawn,” August announces. “Fenris already has retired. We should as well. Let’s start again, fresh in the evening.”

Fenris had helped search through paper archives when electronic records gave us nothing useful. Before he left us, he demanded I call Greta so he could speak to Abby one more time to confirm she was okay with recovering at the apartment with the twins. It was interesting to watch the young woman relax him with the soft Southern cadence of her voice. It made me feel like an eagle-eyed visitor at a zoo, with my breath fogging up the glass as I press my face against the window.

“Fenris’ part of this is done. He’s found the murderer. Roland is dead and will no longer be a liability to our community. Julie’s body has been released to her family. He’s done! I don’t need him hanging around while he gloats about how incapable I am at finding something as simple as a coven of witches.” I grit my teeth. If I had maintained some of my old connections, I would at least have some sources to contact. Even Greta has

lost touch with some of the power players in Ashford. My avoidance is coming back to kick my ass.

My head falls into a stack of papers on my desk. Even the depressed fern is sending some hard judgment my way. “I wish I could be done already. Why did I not play more episodes of the House of Dragon before leaving?” I grumble.

“He said he would still help us find the coven,” August says. “I don’t think Fenris was gloating. Though, I’ll admit I’ve never seen him smile so much when you yelled at that tome for being a useless waste of paper.”

I hum and decide to go back to tapping my pen.

August stands abruptly, making his chair rock violently. “We need to rest and come back with fresh eyes.”

“I can stay awake longer,” I grumble, flicking aimlessly through the index of the tome splayed shamelessly on my desk. I refuse to admit defeat even as my eyes blank over the lines of names. There hasn’t ever been a formal coven established in Ashford due to the heavy mage population. All the names of covens that have popped up in the area are old and outdated by several decades. When we do find a coven leader's name, they no longer seem to be active, or their coven has been merged with other groups. It’s frustrating and exhausting. This has always been the problem with witches. It’s much easier to keep track of mages because you can trace their lineage, and they live as long as any other supernatural with immortality. Witches are just humans who can summon different elements of magic found in our world. Their lives mimic those of humans, and they are just as fragile. Genetics doesn’t need to be involved with who can inherit the ability to harness magic, just the witch's ability to work as a group and accept the obedience of the elements.

This search is becoming a needle in a haystack.

“You may be able to fight the sun for a while, but I can’t deny sleep any longer. I’ve barely slept in days. We’ve caught Julie’s murderer. Everything else can wait until we are rested.” August walks to my side of the desk and pulls my chair out, leaving me exposed and vulnerable.

“It can’t wait.” I sigh. “Don’t you know what this means? If this potion is made public, anyone can be anywhere! We are not safe. No one is, not until we find these witches and destroy whatever source of magic they

have created. That's not even considering this Enhancer drug that somehow managed to poison Abby."

August crouches in front of me. "You're right. This is a lot. And the consequences are scary. Me… Us… being this exhausted is not working. You can stay here and continue doing nothing. I'm going to get some rest."

He stands and shakes his head, disappointed. Somehow that is a kick to the gut. It's the first time he's shown any sign of genuine exasperation with me.

"Wait! Okay!" I jump up and toss everything on my desk into my bag. "You're right. You do need rest. I'm sorry for keeping you awake."

"Wow! A half concession. That must sting a little, Mina Harker," August chuckles as I jog to catch up to him on the way to the elevator.

"I'm part vampire, so I'm always refreshed. We don't get tired," I reply with a big-juicy lie. It's so ripe that it dribbles from my lips down my chin.

"Is that so? You look like a wreck. Besides, you still need a proper feed. Greta told me to keep an eye on you before we left. Something about how you avoid feeding until the point of urgency." He gives me a pointed look I don't appreciate. "You could have drained Roland, you know. No one would have judged you for that."

I make a gagging noise. "There is no way I'm letting that man's fluids inside my body. Consider me a picky eater, but not for the reason you think I am," I add when he looks ready to interrupt. "Greta is a nosy bitch who needs to stay out of my business." I press the button for the lift. "And I'll have you know, Mr big-bad Wolf, being a wreck and being tired are two very different things." I wiggle my finger at his chest as we enter the lift. "I'm always a wreck and am proud to admit it. Being tired is new to me." I chuckle.

"You're back!" Greta chirps as I enter the apartment with August following closely. I have no idea why he insisted on accompanying me up here or why he was still in the apartment earlier this evening. My brain is too full of other information to analyse his behaviours, so I will accept them at face value. It's weird.

"Welcome home! And you brought the wolf back," Greta adds, in a very annoying singsong tone. I glare at her perky attitude.

“Why are you so happy–” I’m cut off by obnoxiously loud moans of pleasure.

“I smell blood… and sex,” August says, his face contorting in disgust. He remains hovering near the door, ready to run at any moment. I’d laugh, but this is not funny. Sex in this apartment is not a joke.

“You didn’t?” I groan and give Greta an exasperated sigh while she maintains her doe-eyed innocence.

She does this whenever her brother annoys her to the point of her considering murdering him, so this has become far too common in our decades of hiding.

“I do not know what y’all are referring to, but if it is because you think she hired that young vampire a blood bunny, then you’d be right. They’ve been copulating for a few hours…” Abby says, her blonde head popping up over the back of the couch with pink, flushed cheeks. “It has, umm… been very loud in here. Even with the tv going.”

“How are you feeling, Abby?” August asks, finally breaching the threshold and officially entering the apartment.

“I’m fine, August. Just great.” Abby moves to sit up, propping her back against the arm of the couch. Greta clears her throat while Abby glances away. “If you discount the massive headache and general achiness everywhere… I’m fine–”

“Oh! Johannes! Oooh…” a female screams.

August and Abby shoot an uncomfortable look at the closed door that leads to the mating couple. Greta claps excitedly at the noise. I turn on her and give her a furious glare as words escape me. I’ve been researching and trying to find a thread of information that will send us in the right direction. Meanwhile, Greta has been helping him to get his dick wet.

“What? At least he’s no longer all weepy and sad. His sulking was grinding my nerves.” Greta’s hands end up on her hips as she waggles her eyebrows at me.

“Greta…” I sigh but move on from the subject since I have no interest in losing this argument again. “We don’t have time for this nonsense.”

“You know the rule. If you aren’t around to comfort him, then he gets sex. We all agreed to it,” Greta counters. She strolls into the kitchen and comes back with a glass of blood. It’s warm to the touch like it was recently heated. I take the glass and find myself drinking it a little too fast. I

need to get a better handle on my feeding if this is how my body reacts when consuming blood.

"We made that agreement a century ago. I was travelling too much for work, and it was causing havoc with all our bonds. There wasn't the same access to technology like there is now." I place the empty cup on the coffee table.

"I should leave you all to settle in for the day rest," August murmurs as he edges back to the entrance. His hand lands on the door handle, preparing to open it and bolt from here the moment we are distracted.

"Nope." I point my finger at him while not moving my glare from Greta. "You made me come here to rest. So you're staying right here and suffering with the rest of us."

Abby stands and stretches like she also intends to join August in leaving.

"And you," I add, flicking my bossy finger to her. "You need more rest. We think this *Enhancer potion* will naturally pass through you with sleep and time. Your medical orders are to continue resting on the couch. If you try to fight me on this, I will call VH and do what Fenris should have done and hand you over to him."

Now experiencing a boost of cocky confidence, my finger moves to the worst offender in the room. Greta.

"For the sake of all of us, soundproof his room. It's disturbing that you haven't already done that."

Greta smirks before grabbing a pen from the counter and using it to draw a rune on the bedroom door. She mutters the activation words with her bleeding palm pressed to the markings. They activate, muting the moaning. The silence on our side is spoiled when all of us sigh in relief.

"A vampire who can perform runes? That is amazing. Do all vampires have that magical ability?" Abby asks in complete awe. Greta and I swing around and stare at her. "That seems like a very useful trick to have up your sleeve when you're out in the field work," she adds, more to herself.

"The Guard hasn't taught you how to perform basic runes?" Greta asks while I recover from the shock.

"No, ma'am, they do not teach that during our orientation. Or since then… Did they used to?" Abby sits up, interested.

“Fenris should have taught you. Damn that fool! He can barely remember to remove his head from his ass,” Greta says with growing rage mirroring mine.

“Why would they stop teaching new recruits these skills? Knowing this stuff could keep them alive!” I snap.

“You were there teaching it to them. The magic users never wanted knowledge of their skills going those outside their species. I doubt it took much political pressure from some of the more conservative mages to stop them from teaching it,” Greta says. “The snakes they are were just waiting for you to get out of the way.”

“Don’t worry, Abby. I’ll teach you some of the basics. Then we can organise proper training in the future. We will need to get you a blank notebook,” I say, while already planning the words I’m going to yell at Abraham about allowing this to happen.

“Wow! Really? I…Thank you, Ms Mina,” she gushes with childish enthusiasm.

“Yeah…” I drawl to smother the happiness overwhelming my heart at bringing someone so much joy with so little. “Now, bedtime for you. You need to rest and recover. I mean it.” As those motherly words come out of my mouth, I nearly choke on them. Somehow this little wolf has buried her way into my heart deep enough that I’m beginning to care what happens to her.

I turn to glare at the other wolf who is also causing me problematic feelings. His energy naturally oozes into the space. His presence should cause my hackles to rise, but it does the opposite. My magic hums wanting to connect with his energy.

“You can sleep in Greta’s room again,” I tell August, shooing him dismissively toward the room.

“And where are you having your day rest?” Greta asks with an amused expression.

Like this was a synchronised, rehearsed moment, everyone turns to stare at the soundless space containing Johannes’ sex.

I shudder. Just because we can’t hear it doesn’t mean we don’t know what’s happening.

I consider the options for a bed. To be in a sunproof spot really only leaves me with one practical solution that has blood dancing through my veins. I’m sharing with August.

“I’m with you, partner.” I march past him into the room. He follows at an amused pace. I close the door when he passes me. The click of the latch engaging echoes my thoughts. I’ve just made this very awkward.

“What about Greta? Where will she sleep? Doesn’t she need the day to sleep?” August asks, glancing back into the living room.

“Greta can go weeks without sleep.” I shrug.

“She is that old,” August scoffs like he’s not sure he believes it.

“Mmh, she sure is more on the ancient side of history. Sadly, the young ones like me need their beauty sleep because, apparently, I look *tired*.” I check the gap between the window and the queen bed. There is enough space for me to rest without getting hit by direct light during the sun hours. Once I am in my day sleep, my body doesn’t care about comforts like a mattress. They are an indulgence that is reserved for the minutes waiting for sleep to take me.

I grab the dust cover and fold it to fit the gap. A pillow and blanket are thrown in my direction, and I place them down to complete the illusion of a bed – not floor.

“Thanks,” I sink to my knees.

“Thanks for letting me have the bed.” August smirks as he sits on the edge.

“The floor is more convenient for me than the mattress. I did not consider your comfort in the equation of my sleep.”

“Ah! I was waiting for the bite to come. There it is.” He chuckles and shakes his head.

I hate that his playful side makes worms writhing around in my stomach.

“Did you know that touching a sleeping vampire will cause them to go into a blind rage? Our bodies don’t wake us, it just reacts violently to the threat,” I inform him.

“Now you’re trying to seduce me. You know all the right things to say to hit my buttons. Your attempts to lure me into your bed are so transparent, Mina Harker.” His sarcasm has us laughing. My laughter ends as a yawn as the sun rising weighs down my eyelids.

August shakes his head as he stands. “Jokes aside. Are you okay on the floor?”

The reply on my tongue becomes dust when he peels off his button-down shirt. I knew he was hiding a defined body under those borrowed

clothes from how they clung to him. Most wolves tend to be lean and muscular. August defies that by being tall and broad.

What's worse is my fangs ache to sink into his neck and discover what flavours lay inside. I rub my brow. I think I might still be feeling the effects of the Enhancer I came into contact with when we were at the morgue.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Have a good day sleep, Mina," August says as he climbs into bed on the side furthest from me.

"Good rest, August Andino."

I'm thankful I don't have to lay awake here processing those corrupting thoughts about August because the day sleep is always like turning a light... off.

✽✽✽

Waking, I stretch out my limbs before searching for the wolf in the room.

The bed is made with hospital corners, and the space is completely empty. So is the attached bathroom. It's like he was never here. For some reason, his absence seems weirder than if I'd discovered him still sleeping, tucked under the sheets.

Shrugging off the feeling, I jump in the shower and let the chilly spray of water that comes in those first few moments prepare me for the night. It's a relief when the heat kicks in.

I exit the bathroom with a towel wrapped around me. A pair of black trousers, a matching black tank top, and a black bomber jacket to bring it together are folded and waiting for me.

It's perfectly bland while being everything I need in an outfit that will allow me confidence and comfort.

Thanks, Greta, my fashionista angel.

I walk into the living area, and all heads turn in my direction. Johannes, the little prick, is so high from his proclivities that sex practically oozes from his pores. With his legs spread, he takes up as much space as possible on the sofa.

"Where's Greta?" I ask after doing a quick headcount.

Two wolves.

Half a set of twins...

And a partridge in a pear tree.

“She is making a phone call,” Abby says as she pops up over the top of Greta’s laptop like a damn jack-in-the-box.

I nudge Johannes's shin and force him to stop his obscene manspreading. He gets the message and makes space for me to join him. His arm curls around my shoulder and drags me close until I am snug in that perfect spot under his arm. August doesn’t look up from his phone as he sits at the kitchen bench.

“You found a notebook,” I say, pointing at the pale pink book and matching pen beside Abby. Her fingers wrap protectively tightly around the book.

“I had time to buy one early today. You said you’d teach me –”

“Runes,” I finish, nodding. “I will. The more protection you have in your arsenal, the better.” A smile corrupts my face. She bought herself the notepad but didn’t bother buying new clothes or asking any of us for some to borrow.

“And there is no one as good at runes as my Mina,” Greta says. Her pumps sing across the wooden floor as she walks out of Johannes’ sex room with a victorious smile. “I found him! The sneaky fucker thought he could hide, but I am always two steps ahead. I found him!”

August stands and moves closer while Abby's eyes dart between all of us.

“Griffin? Where is he?” I ask, smacking my hand down on Johannes’ thigh. The shock of her declaration momentarily distracts me from her outfit. If a fairy and mermaid somehow reproduced, that would be Greta’s multicoloured tulle skirt. Somehow, she thinks that pairing it with a white crop top and a hot pink bra tone down the look. “What are you wearing?” Even by Greta’s standards, this is over-the-top insanity wrapped up in an outfit.

“Fucking hell, Mina. Be careful of the goods,” Johannes groans, rubbing his leg. My hand slaps over his mouth to stop any of his nonsense from infecting the conversation.

“Forget the question about the clothes… you found Griffin?”

“So, this is what happened…” Greta says, strutting her way to the centre of the space. She’s always loved a dramatic reveal, so I let her have

her moment and bit down on my lip. “Griffin always lives in obscure villages that are barely noted on a map. Those are the types of areas I’ve been searching, especially European towns, because that’s where he tends to stay longest. It’s his historical roots, after all. He only kept a few people as hired help in the past. This time even those people were a dead end.” A pause as she waits for us to nod along like eager students. “What I hadn’t considered is how much society has changed with the evolution of the computer.”

“We don’t need a history lesson,” I snap.

She ignores me, gives me her back, and directly addresses the wolves. “With access to technology, he doesn’t need to hide and live the way he always has. This has allowed him to grow wealth legally because no one needs to know the faceless man behind the voice.”

“He is no longer the scary demon. Or evil spirit. He is considered a quiet, eccentric recluse whose visibility comes from being online,” Abby says, nodding as she writes something in her notebook.

“He has embraced being out in the open while remaining out of sight,” Greta agrees. “And that change is something I didn’t consider when I started my search.” She twirls, and her skirt shimmers in the light.

Johannes grunts. When I keep my hand in place, he licks it. I snatch it quickly from his mouth and wipe the drool on his pants.

“Dearest sister, are you telling us that he is essentially a set of fucking car keys, and he is exactly where you left him?” Johannes laughs.

“Damn it, Greta! Where is he?” Having enough of the theatrics, I jump to my feet, grab Greta’s arm, and spin her to face me. It’s time for her curtsy and the roses to be thrown because we need to focus on the task ahead.

“It just came to me. I had a figurative lightbulb moment. I knew he would just be there, out in the open. Hiding in plain sight. So, I took the next logical step,” she continues, ignoring me. I sigh, knowing she will not skimp on the details that lead to her big unveiling while there are others in the room.

“What’s the next logical step?” Abby asks as she documents this drivel. That notebook was meant to be reserved for my lifesaving runes. Not a place to record Greta’s inflated ego.

“Here!” Greta states with wavering enthusiasm.

August leans forward to see around Greta and meets my confused gaze.

“Has she ingested spiked blood or something?" he asks. “This conversation doesn’t make any sense.”

“He’s here!” she says, her pep has finally been replaced with her snark. I always enjoy this side of her more than the perky, upbeat one.

“He’s here? In Ashford?” August asks, his wolf surging forward with a vengeance, making Abby and I shudder under the sudden shock of power.

“Where? How…” Again my stomach is churning. Another warning sign that this is much bigger than any of us had anticipated.

“I’ve already texted you the address,” Greta shrugs.

“You’re such an ass!” Now I’m near yelling. “You could have just said that to begin with,” I chide distractedly as I search for my phone. She takes her fluttering fairy clothes and sits in the position I vacated next to her brother. He smirks at Greta before leaning down and kissing her head.

“It's not her problem that you’re allergic to your phone. It’s the first thing you should check when you wake up,” Johannes shrugs. Now I’m the one being reprimanded.

I scramble with comical enthusiasm to my bag and pull out the phone. It has several missed calls from Van Helsing and a single text message from Greta. The message was sent after I woke up, likely just before she walked out of the room to join us. Checking the phone the moment I woke up wouldn’t have done anything to expedite the situation. I don’t bother letting Johannes know that I just won our argument in my head.

I click on the address, which pings a location on my maps.

He’s so close. Only a twenty-minute drive away from this apartment by the docks. Looks like the warehouse district.

“August, we are leaving now!” I yell, shoving the phone back in my bag and throwing it over my shoulder.

“I…I am coming with you,” Abby says, snapping her notebook closed.

I open the front door and stare at the elevators to buy myself time before answering.

As I open my mouth to object, August gives me an imploring look.

“We don’t know what we will come up against. And since you are paranoid to the point of insanity, Abby is good backup.”

Abby is good backup?

She’s a pup who has barely grown into her claws.

“She can remain in the car with a phone to contact the twins. That’s what I am agreeing to,” I sigh. “We are leaving now, so be quick getting ready.”

“Already ready, Ms Mina,” she chirps, jumping to her feet and rushing past me with August's long strides to follow her. Johannes chuckles at Abby’s enthusiasm. I flick him the bird before slamming the door shut.

“Mina, don’t forget the backpack. Griffin cannot be trusted,” Greta yells, freezing my feet in their tracks. I rush back inside and pick up the bag that is waiting for me on the kitchen counter.

“If you give me the address, I will text Fenris so he can meet us before engaging with the target,” Abby says as I join them in the car.

“Did you miss the part about me being paranoid?” I nod my head in August’s direction. “I’m definitely not letting that happen. Two wolves are enough for my nose and my mind.”

“But…” Abby gapes at me before blinking innocent, imploring eyes at August.

“Mina, we really should call –”

“No!” I snap. “I’ve had my fill of him. The Guard. We will be parting ways right here if you start calling in more people. And I will go on my own.” I wave my phone around, reminding them that only I have Griffin’s location.

“If that’s what you want, Ms Mina.” Abby’s head bobbles as she writes in her notebook.

“You don’t need to document everything,” I add, scowling at the little book.

“I disagree, Abby,” August drawls, grinning. “I’d appreciate written evidence that when this all goes to shit, and we are running for our lives, there was an alternative path we could have taken.”

Chapter 15

Mina

“A warehouse?” I scoff as August drives us into a dockyard. “He always did love a cliché.” Though he has always been a creature of comfort, this doesn't strike me as a typical meeting place for him. I was expecting a glitzy hotel lobby or something with more of a historical personality.

This place is barely lit by the distant lamp posts.

“Says the woman who practically made cliché’s cliché,” August replies teasingly. Abby chuckles from her seat in the back of the car with her notepad on her lap.

“Funny,” I drawl before leaving the car the moment August has slowed enough for a safe exit. I don’t wait for the older wolf to join me.

My eyes search for something out of place. It becomes impossible because this place is as barren as a runway. Shipping crates are the only thing on the periphery. It wouldn’t surprise me if he had been watching us long before coming here. He’s probably been trailing us since the apartment.

“Number five,” August calls from his window as he parks.

“There is a directory map over here,” Abby says, bounding out of the car. My mouth falls open at her as she blatantly ignores my one rule for her accompanying us. My glare has August quickly running after her.

“Building five is listed as located at the back of the lot,” Abby calls to me, scribbling in her notebook, having no idea I’m on the verge of scolding her. August starts ushering her back to the car. Her feet move while her head stays buried in her notes.

I turn to follow them back to the car so August can drive us further into the lot. Something is clawing at my senses. My eyes close as I take a moment to taste the salty air for magic. I relax my shadows and let it trickle around me. I pause when I catch a quiver in the breeze. It’s a feather tickling my mind. My eyes open, and that’s when I find it. Or rather, see it. Something moves in the corner of my eye line.

I smirk as I slowly turn, causing August to halt. His hands rest on Abby's shoulder, which brings her to a stumbling stop.

"Mina?" August straightens and sniffs the air. "I've got nothing."

"His scent is masked. It's part of his fable abilities," Abby replies. When I give her a curious glance, she beams. "Greta gave me a run down on Mr Griffin yesterday."

I nod approvingly before focusing back on the man hiding from us. "Come out. Come out. Wherever you are!" I sing with a sinister grin.

Abby squeaks and does this strange little jump, spinning around frantically in a circle.

"Something just…umm… squeezed my bottom."

"You are a disgusting pig, Griffin! Have you not matured at least a little in these long years apart?" My amusement at our reunion sours to disgust. "I shouldn't need to remind you not to molest the pup."

"You know me, Mina. Always been a lost cause for a pretty woman," the invisible man says from behind me. I don't spook, remaining calm and unphased by his close appearance. "My hands have a will of their own."

I pull off the backpack and toss it on the ground. I am now standing between Greta's humour and Griffin's perverse desire to be in a constant state of nakedness.

"You will be respectful, or we will have more issues than we currently do," I tell him as I point to the bag. "Bandage up, naked man. We will not be talking until your junk is well and truly covered."

The bag floats, and the zip echoes around the vacant area. "You brought me bandages. You could have just brought me clothing," Griffin grumbles as one of the bandages unwinds. "You won't allow me any dignity." I huff, annoyed at the accusation that I am robbing him of dignity.

The history of the bandages dates back to when Griffin went through a grave-robbing period. As punishment, the council imprisoned him for a time. During this time, he was forced to be dressed in bandage rags because they were harder to use to build a disguise body for an escape. It was also noted ironically that he was parading around like an Egyptian mummy. He escaped prison, as was expected, but he has never shaken off the humiliation of the debasement.

"You could have arrived dressed in a full outfit instead of running around naked and spying like the creep you are." I may not be able to see

his expressions, but I know the man well enough to know he's grinning at me for calling him out. Griffin's pile of white material flutters in the breeze as he haphazardly wraps them around his body.

"I wanted to observe your arrival without being seen," he says. "Greta and the other one are noticeably absent. Have you finally ditched the pack and are looking for a new group of supernaturals to hang with?"

"You know I'm still with the twins. I'm sure your sources told you that Greta was calling around."

Griffin laughs, and the bandages move and expand with his body movement.

"Ah, Greta! That little she-devil." Before I can warn him about his comments, he continues. "I called her when I heard you were looking into the mysterious case of invisibility." His laughter builds to obnoxiousness, especially when he sees my face contort into annoyance. "One of my old contacts asked me why I was in Ashford. That's when I learned there could be someone else like me. I came here as fast as possible to investigate the rumour, and your name popped up."

I shake my head as I fight a smile. "It must really hurt her ego that you reached out before she could track you down. You know how much pride she has at being the best at her job."

"It seems we were dragged into the same mess, Mina. I thought I'd be courteous and call Greta to let her know I wanted to meet you. And now, here you are."

"Mmh. Our paths have intertwined again. I hope we remain on the same side." I huff, checking on August and Abby. They remain comfortable staying back and letting the fables reunite.

"I've missed you, Mina Harker. You have always been a good adversary to my villainy," Griffin says with strikingly genuine emotion. He ties off his final bandage.

"I wish it could say it's mutual, but I've had much better." I cluck my tongue, shaking my head to clear it of this silly banter. "Are you truly here to telling me that you had no idea about this… *situation*? Don't try to play me." I choose not to explicitly mention the potion and reveal how much I know.

"I could ask you the same thing, Mina Harker. Your return to our high society has been noted. It's even caused ripples for those of us who attempt to stay out of the public eye."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “Me? You want to talk about me when humans are running around with your power?” Without needing to call on them, my magic springs to life and wraps around me. They hum in eager anticipation of being used to vent my frustration.

“Arguing about semantics is such a productive task,” Griffin says, circling around our little group. We all spin on our toes to keep track of him. “Hasn’t Van Helsing given you enough pats on the back to validate your good behaviour?”

“Semantics…You stupid fuck,” I hiss to show how unproductive I feel.

“We should leave. Go somewhere a bit less exposed,” August says. Abby nods with eager agreement, crushing her notebook to her chest with quivering hands.

“Fine,” I snap in frustration, not at August but at how easily distracted I am by Griffin that I’ve not prioritised safety. This is always part of Griffin's act of distracting you with words while causing chaos behind his back. I can’t forget my purpose for being in this dockyard: to secure the man so I can interrogate him.

“Get in the car, Griffin. We are taking you somewhere secure. Then, we are having a long talk about how we handle this invisibility issue.” I say, nodding toward the car. “Abby, you’re sitting in the front seat. I don’t trust Mr Handsy with you.”

Griffin follows August and Abby as they move quickly to the vehicle. I wait to take the last place in this messed up dancing line to ensure that Griffin doesn’t try anything underhanded toward the others.

The bandages around his back sag, leaving disturbing gaps in his bindings. Even though I can’t see what they are meant to cover, the idea of his nakedness still bothers me. The thought of his dangling dick was horrifying when just displaying an ankle was considered indecent and immoral. Now, in this time, it’s not scandalous; it’s just perverted and gross. It wouldn’t surprise me if his genitals were deformed from all the excess exposure to the elements. The only perk is that nudity doesn’t include pockets, so there is nowhere to stash weapons.

I slam the car door, which August takes as a signal to rapidly accelerate, though none of us are buckled in. He meets my gaze in the rearview mirror.

“Where are we taking him?” August asks.

“Headquarters,” Abby says automatically. I shake my head, stopping that idea before it can grow roots.

“Where have you been staying, Griffin?” I ask since this couldn’t be where he spent most of his time. Any location he has been using will be far more secure than any place we could find with such short notice, and I’m not dragging another person back to the apartment. If we continue like this, the twins will need to find a bigger base.

“I’d prefer not to say,” Griffin replies, reaching above his head to grab the safety bar.

Pinching my eyes shut, I take a big breath. “You don’t make this easy,” I say through gritted teeth.

“To the apartment?” August asks. This is getting too personal since I have never let Griffin into a residence of mine in the past. Our encounters have always stayed in neutral territory.

“To the apartment,” I reluctantly agree. My hands search my pockets for my phone to let Greta know the plans. She is not going to be happy about this. On the other hand, Johannes will think this hiccup is a great distraction to his pain and will revel in the commotion it brings.

“I have a question, Mina, since I have you all to myself back here,” Griffin says. I ignore him and continue typing on my phone. “Why did you give up that lovely home to move into some overpriced apartment? It’s nice, but it’s no home.” He plays saddened, like a father inquiring about a child's troubles.

I lower my phone, gaping at the pile of bandages. “How long have you been watching me?” I’m too stunned to try for a poker face. August’s chest rumbles as he meets my eyes again in the mirror.

“Not long, but long enough to know how much you loved those suburbs. You gave it up so easily, barely a fight. That’s not the Mina I remember.”

“I was curious too, Ms Mina, about the apartment. It’s a beautiful place in the middle of the new district. A few minutes from Headquarters. It’s a fantastic spot,” Abby says, not understanding the menacing, threatening nature of our conversation. My stare has the notepad inch up in front of her blushing cheeks.

“We are not discussing my personal life,” I hiss. “How many times have you been to my home?”

“Only the *one* time.” There is a grin in his voice as he shifts in his seat.

“I’m glad I gave up that house. It would never feel the same knowing you’ve violated my privacy.”

August slows to a stop making me jerk to attention. I hunt for the threat, but it’s a set of traffic lights that are flashing red. No threat, just traffic rules being obeyed.

The lights change to green, and the ticking of the indicator cuts through the tension radiating off each of us. August turns left at the intersection, moving us further away from the shipping yard and closer to civilization. I slump back in my seat when the road ahead is dark, and there isn’t another vehicle in sight. I feel ridiculous for being so jumpy. I’m all over the place with my reactions.

Griffin sits up and glances out the window. A car turns onto the road up ahead. Their headlights become blinding against the midnight backdrop. The car electronics chime as Griffin throws open the car door.

“Shit,” August yells and slams on the breaks. He doesn’t realise that he played right in Griffin’s hand. He would never have jumped from a moving vehicle, but he would run out of a stopped one. I try to grab him, but my fingers only catch air.

Time slows.

Bandages flutter as they are thrown to the wind as Griffin strips himself free of coverings. The imagery would be beautiful if the outcome weren’t so damn terrifying.

We’ve been tricked… I’m too slow to know which game we are playing. Worse, I don’t know who the players are.

I fight with the buckle on my seat belt. It finally releases, and I slide out after Griffin. The man is lost to me the moment the last bandage is discarded. The streetlights barely create enough light to cause any shadows or movements I can quickly track. Knowing this is my last moment to find him, I shut off everything around me and tuned my magic into the surroundings.

I ignore August as he yells.

And Abby screams.

Even the noise of tires squealing attempts to infect my mind. I shut that out too.

With my shadows, I search. They stretch out but don’t find anything within the immediate radius. They hum with demands for hunting and finding their prey.

My search ends before it can really begin when I’m thrown into the air. The traumatising sound of metal crumbling as it impacts my body is louder than my bones as they snap. I try to lift my head, but the ground is the only thing that keeps my body in one piece since they are merged together. A scream gets stuck on its way out of my throat as a healing sleep forces my consciousness to retreat.

Chapter 16

Mina

“Mina,” a voice roars. It rattles around me while never landing where it should.

I open my mouth to reply, and only liquid spills from my lips.

A distant scream. Growls.

Get up, Mina. You are in danger.

There is a sensation of drowning, choking on water while I struggle to find a way to the surface.

My instincts scream at me to wake up while my body refuses to cooperate. Maybe I cannot move if the pounding ache coating every inch of my body is an indicator.

A groan follows a panted breath. The near whisper feels like it tears apart my lips on the way out. I try to lick them to soothe them, but I might as well be rubbing sandpaper on a wound.

I crack an eye open to meet a blurry darkness. I’ve always felt at home in the dark, even before I was turned, so I take a moment to enjoy it until my shrieking sense returns. They demand safety. They demand vengeance.

“This is why you need to feed more,” I croak, swallowing a few times to bring more lubrication to my throat. “Greta will be unbearable when she finds out about this. The nagging will be endless.” If I had been consuming fresh human blood regularly, and didn’t rely so heavily on Red-Eye, my damage would have healed to the point of being fit enough to move. Deeper recovery can happen during the day rest.

“Mina?” a soft voice calls. I snap upright like I’ve been summoned. My body forgets the agony in its hunt for the person behind the whimpering voice. I blink. Then blink again to shake away the hue covering my sight. I leave my stupor and face the reality that my mind was trying to hide from me. It doesn’t matter how many times I bat my eyes because it doesn’t do anything to change the cold, concrete prison I find myself in.

“A cell. At least it’s not the worst form of captivity I’ve found myself in,” I mumble, searching the space outside my cell. Concrete walls, check! Drab pendant light, check. Bars, check! A little blonde woman in a cell opposite me…

Oh fuck.

“Damn it! Abby, what is… what happened?”

A tear runs down her cheek as she gives me a quivering smile. Her fingers wave before quickly wiping her face clean of emotion. I scout the area I can view from my cell but don’t locate August. Two empty cells sit on either side of Abby.

I attempt to climb to my feet but barely reach my knees before keeling to my side. Everything aches. No matter how much I force it away, there's no denying the pain. I will need a lot more time healing before I am close to being able to move around.

I drag my useless body toward the bars and reach for Abby’s outstretched arm. We remain separated by a foot from each other. My hand falls to the ground in defeat, as does hers.

A chill stiffens my spine as Abby gives me a timid smile, inspiring me to work against my instinct to withdraw and cower. This isn’t just about me but also the life of this young wolf who has no reason to be dragged into arguments that are older than she is.

“Tell me what happened. My memory is coming up blank.” My mind reels with questions that could lead to planning our escape. The search for answers stalls when I realise I haven’t asked the most obvious question first. “Abby, are you hurt? Where is August?”

“I can’t see him. I don’t know where he is.”

Shit. “Okay…” I try to get a good view of her to check for injuries. She is hunched so I can’t see much except for a lot of blood splattered over her clothing. “And are you hurt, Abby?”

“Oh!” she squeaks like my query has embarrassed her. “Umm, my head aches. And I had a few minor broken bones…” she says shamefully.

“There is no such thing as a minor break,” I hiss at the bars that are preventing me from checking on her.

“Please don’t worry about me. I’m fine now, Ms Mina. When I woke up, I changed into my wolf form. That healed the broken bones,” Abby replies, waving off my concern. I know that is a partial truth since it’s a known fact that changing into their werewolf side starts the healing

process. Wolves heal fast, not as quick as vampires, but faster than most. That doesn't remove the need for care and rest.

"So you're recovering from broken bones," I sigh before taking a deep guiding breath. "What do you remember? Tell me whatever you can."

"What do I remember?" Abby asks herself as her fingers slowly swirl around on the concrete ground. The movement captures her attention. "We collected Mr Griffin – umm, no one has ever mentioned his last name."

"His last name is Griffin. His first name is Jack. Jack Griffin," I inform her with a soft smile.

"Ah!" she chuckles, her hands moving to her lap where her notebook has been living. I decide to make it a priority to replace it as soon as we are safe. Somehow those blank pages allowed her to picture a future filled with the power that comes with knowledge. The same knowledge that keeps her choices informed and carries the weight of safety.

"It is a normal name for such a vile person," Abby glances up and stiffens at whatever is coming next. "We were driving back to the apartment. We weren't very far from where we collected Mr Griffin. He opened the car door and dashed out of the vehicle. You followed after him. While we were distracted by his escape, our SUV was hit by another oncoming vehicle. It was dark, and I could only see the headlights coming for us. It seemed massive, like a truck." Abby takes a deep breath before continuing. "Anyway… we must have been the target because it came straight for us. The SUV was crushed, and August got stuck between parts of the metal frame. He somehow ended up mostly on top of me."

She looks guilt-ridden because she suspects, as I do, that August deliberately put his body between her and the crushing car to keep her safe. Her petite fingers shift back to stroking the floor, lost again in movement.

"Mina, he was trying to protect me." The tears trickling down her cheeks are quickly swatted away as she shakes her head.

"It's his instinct, Abby. Please don't punish yourself because he would put your life over his own."

She nods slowly, though my words don't make it past her emotional armour.

"I was able to shove open the door. Before I could get out and find help, there was this sharp pain in my neck. I could hear some voices arguing... I don't remember what they were saying before everything blacked out. Then I woke up here."

I reach for my neck, but any mark left from an injection would have already healed if I were given anything like Abby.

I sigh as the extent of my injuries makes more sense. “The thing that hit me was a whole-fucking-car. No wonder every inch of my body aches like I’ve been scrapped off the side of the road.”

I literally was.

Abby stares at me with wide eyes. “I didn’t… I just assumed. Oh my gosh! You were hit by the SUV when we were knocked off the road?” Her tone increases with every word. “How are you still alive?”

“The accident didn’t take my head off,” I joke wryly. At Abby’s gaping face, I add, “I’m fine, Abby. That level of damage must have immediately triggered my healing sleep. Since becoming a fable it’s assumed that I suffer from the same weakness as vampires regarding death since I was gifted with the same type of immortality. I won’t die unless I’m burnt by the sun or beheaded. Blood loss won’t kill me, only keep me unconscious until my heart can pump blood again. That’s why staking our hearts can incapacitate us, not kill us.”

“I know all that, Mina. Are you actually okay?” Abby growls at me as signs of her wolf come to the surface. She’s so agitated that she forgets her Southern manners.

“I won’t be able to heal anymore until I’ve fed again. Even then, I’ll still need a few days to recover from this level of damage. Do you know how much time has passed?” I ask, stretching my arms above my head which I regret as my broken ribs sing with pain.

“No idea.” She leans back from the bars and props herself against the cell wall, legs curled underneath her. “I lost time when they injected me with the needle. My transition to my wolf form took much longer than normal. I’m sorry, I have no idea how long we’ve been here.”

“And August?” I ask the question I’ve been afraid to think about. I copy her position against the cell wall. I take a deep breath and try to detect other heartbeats in the room. The outcome is an aching head and a lingering sweetness tickling my senses.

“He’s not close. I can’t see or smell him.” Abby’s face contorts into confusion. “Now that I think about it… I can’t really smell you either, even though you are a few feet away. That’s odd, right?” She shifts around. “I am worried about him. He was really beaten up by the accident. You don’t think…”

I ignore the comment about August's state and focus on our immediate circumstances because I'm not ready to consider the possibility that he's not fine.

"Witches," I mutter like the curse on the world they are. "This must be the same coven that's involved in these experiments. They will have manipulated the cells so that they impact our abilities."

I scour the room for runes I believe are here and find the ancient symbols on the ceiling in the back corner.

"Up there," I say, pointing. "They have carved a rune into the ceiling. I don't recognise it. Probably in a different dialect than I use. It's likely some kind of containment rune that will be designed to dampen the prisoner magic. It will have a small radius power. We will regain control once we are outside the rune's reach."

"Why would they take us?" Abby asks, a whimper in her voice. "I don't even want to say this out loud… Why not kill us? We were investigating a human murder. That boyfriend didn't give us any answers that would lead us to learn anything useful about who these people are. Taking us brings more attention to what they've been trying to hide. Ms Mina, why are we still alive?" The horror in her voice matches the feeling in my gut.

"I don't know."

My hands run over my body to explore the remaining damage in my body. The bones that were broken have crudely healed. I must be black and blue since blood still trickles when I disturb a wound.

"I'm surprised I'm even awake," I mutter. Vampires only wake from a healing sleep when the threat is significant to their external safety. Thanks to my shadow magic, my instincts for danger are higher than a normal vampire, meaning I wasn't ever in a deep healing sleep. My body remained ready and primed to fight.

"Your magic?" Abby asks. "Can you use any of it?"

My magic is drained lower than what should be safe, thanks to the significant blood loss from being smashed into by a car. My shadows are as sluggish as I feel. "Any spare magic within me is currently directed to healing. I can't stop my body from running down my reserves while trying to heal all the internal damage. My shadows are useless unless I feed to gain more strength. And the cherry on this joyless fruit cake is that I've just

realised that these containment spells don’t allow my magic to naturally regenerate.”

“So… What? We are helpless?” Her voice dips a toe into anger.

“If I could feed, it would help my healing and restore some of my magic levels. I doubt anyone will be sending down care packages for me, though. They don’t strike me as stupid. Then again, they did take personnel of the Guard hostage. And they took me. Some may consider that as an act of warfare that will bring about a swift demise to those behind those acts,” I chuckle and regret it immediately as it jostles my ribs again.

“You can drink from me,” Abby says. “I can do that for you.”

The offer has my fangs aching, even though it’s a proposition that is easy to turn down.

I sigh and shake my head at the generous woman. “Abby... that’s very sweet of you to offer. But you’re too wounded. Besides, you’re too far anyway for me to reach. Weakening you right now isn’t a good option. There isn’t much we can do until someone comes here and reveals their plans for us. We are probably in for a long wait.”

“Griffin,” she says like she’s placing puzzle pieces together. “He must have been collaborating with the witches this whole time. Maybe we stumbled onto something we weren’t meant to, and he needed to remove us from the trail.”

“I’d say that you’re right on the money.”

“It still doesn’t explain why we are alive. If it were me, and I was playing the role of evil genius, I would have killed us at the car.”

I grin, enjoying this side of her. “Then I’m glad you’re not the evil we are facing.” She beams at me like that was some kind of compliment. “From the moment I watched that footage of Julie’s home, it has had a rotten stench attached to it. I’ve felt like I’ve been missing a key piece this whole time. Even now, everything is all laid out, and I still can’t see what is happening. Nothing fits. People aren’t acting in the ways their previous behaviours would dictate.” I stare up at the rune. “Abby, the Guard now offers personal leave! I mean, the world has lost its damn mind.” My head rolls so my eyes can fix on Abby. “Investigating was never something I was meant to be part of. That’s why a whole separate unit of investigators does all of this. I am throwing some blame at asshole-Fenris for not doing more in his role of Investigator to stop this.” That could be irrational, but being in a cage doesn’t make sanity an easy option.

“I don’t understand,” Abby whispers.

“The Council gave orders and pointed me toward finishing what those with weaker stomachs could not. I don’t investigate. You know how the Guard is structured. I naïvely trusted others at their word and orders. That may sound foolish to someone born of this period, but there was a time when you never expected someone to break formed trust.” The light flickers, causing us both to stare at the pendant light. “That is why it was so easy to manipulate me.”

Those words are for me to admit because I shouldn’t have allowed myself to be so easy to lie to. I should have conducted my own personal investigations. I should have never gotten mixed up with the Council. There is an odd comfort in admitting my failings to Abby, which worries me that I might be making my deathbed confessions.

“Our world is built on trust. Every transaction with another person is based on a foundation of truth and honesty. If you had never trusted those making the decisions, you would never have survived this long. You shouldn’t hate yourself for participating in your history. That also doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take those lessons of failure into the future.” She stares at her hands. “You think I am young. And I am. That doesn’t make me stupid for trusting you and knowing in my heart that no matter what happens, you will have my back, Ms Mina. I hope you know that I have yours too.” Fierce eyes coated in a yellowish tinge of her wolf meet mine.

“That was profound and weirdly intimidating,” I tell her. “Thank you, Abby.”

“I got some of that wisdom from an InspoTok,” Abby says, now looking embarrassed.

I blink at her. I don’t know what that means, but I pretend I do as I nod soundly.

“We are getting out of here, Abby. Now is the time to rest. Save as much strength as you can because we need to be ready to strike when the moment presents itself.”

Something rattles, and then the thunk of a door being pushed open comes from the top of the staircase.

An overbearing light overtakes the room, causing me to cover my eyes as the stench of betrayal swamps the prison.

“Oh Grandma! What a big nose you have,” I call out, gripping the bars and twisting my neck to see someone who cannot be seen. The man is dressed in a tailored suit and wearing beige makeup that builds the shape of his face, leaving two empty holes where his eyes should be. “Where is August?”

“Apologies about the captivity,” Griffin says as the door slams shut. “I did request they dim the lights so you could bathe in the shadows that you find so homey. I’d hate for you to be uncomfortable.”

“You scoundrel,” I hiss. I try not to show any weakness as my eyes stay trained on the walking suit. “You son of a whore!”

“Language, Mina. This does not need to be uncivilised,” he tuts, coming to stand before me, a smirk crinkling the makeup around his lips.

“Stop the theatrics and acts of grandeur. You owe me more than speeches and ego. Why am I locked in a cage like some animal?”

His head tilts to the side. It’s so disconcerting not being able to meet his eyes. It’s a power move that he will always have over me.

“A deal was laid before me that I couldn’t refuse. Mina, we’ve never really been enemies, nor have we really been friends.”

“That may have been true to some extent in the past. My loyalty to fables doesn’t rely on me being bosom buddies with you all.” My hands strangle the bars. “You’ve now drawn a line in the mud, and we both find ourselves on opposite sides. How many times could I have let them keep you in a damn cage? Or let them dissect you? I chose to keep you alive and out of their reach with every resource and connection I had.”

“You kept me alive to protect your own skin and stop them from committing the same crimes against you. Don’t pretend your actions as a Hunter were an act of anything but unforgivable, brutal violence.”

I glance at the ground with my jaw grinding, wanting to challenge his words. Yet no challenge can be presented when it’s mostly the truth.

“You and I are not like them,” he says as his arm extends to gesture to everyone outside this prison. “You will never be seen as a mage. Nor accepted as a vampire. The prestige you held in polite society died when you became this monstrous version of yourself. I am the closest to kin you now have.”

“As kin, we should be protecting each other,” I ground out.

“You never truly cared for me.” He says it with an aged bitterness that tells of a resentment that’s been growing for years.

“Why would I be loyal to a psychotic, murderous thief?” I ask, truly dumbfounded.

He is not a hero, and this isn’t a David and Goliath battle. He made his decision centuries ago, and now he can play in the sandpit with the toys of his choosing.

“Why am I not surprised that you don’t have an ounce of understanding in you? You were always heartless even before you stopped having a beating heart.”

“That’s me,” I drawl, rolling my eyes. “Cold, emotionless, heartless. What other insults would you like to add to the list?” I shift my glare back to him. “This is a boring and pointless conversation, Griffin. You’ve made your decisions, and now you will live with the consequences. Why am I locked in a cage? Let’s have a real conversation. A truthful one. None of this bullshit you tell yourself so you can sleep at night.”

“A dog on a short leash. That’s all you’ll ever be, Mina Harker,” Griffin says. “It’s time for that lead to change hands. You can either move on with the times or get sent to the farm where all naughty dogs end up. It’s all your choice now. Me? I don’t give a shit about you or fables or any other misguided principles you spew. I am aligning myself with the right side of history. To bring long overdue change. So it’s time to come to heel for your new masters or become a sacrifice for the greater cause.”

“Oh, let me guess. These witches want to rise against the Council. End the Families' reigns in the territories.”

How obvious! How boring. How predictable.

“You would defend those people who punish us with one hand, all the while rewarding us with the other. Is that where your morals now lie?” Griffin moves closer to my cell while maintaining a safe distance from my reach.

“We need control and order. Anything you are proposing will just cause the opposite of that. The death and destruction that happen because of this will lead to the near extinction of many species.”

Griffin hums to himself while shaking his head like he is chastising a child. “You always had this holier-than-thou approach, even after everything Van Helsing did to you. That lie about your enemy’s demise was so cruel. Telling you that the vampire who killed your love and imprisoned you was punished by a blood-drained sleep and not executed like you were

told.” He shakes his head in disappointment. “You let Van Helsing control you even though he lives on his knees sucking the cocks of the Council.”

I don’t rise to the prodding since my pain is well-advertised in our world. He’s not opening wounds that others haven’t tried to before.

“And you, Jack Griffin. How have they treated you so poorly? A slap on the wrist is now too rough for your soft feelings?”

He turns and stares at Abby, who has stayed remarkably quiet during this exchange.

“You don’t have compassion for me. What about those innocents you wish to protect.” Griffin smiles at Abby, who shuffles back from the bars. “The name is Abigail, isn’t it?”

“Y...yes,” she stutters. I pull on the bars as acid bubbles burst in the pit of my stomach.

“Leave her alone,” I growl. It goes unnoticed by Griffin as he continues with his questions.

“What would the Council like to do to someone like you, pup?”

Everything inside me stills as I lock eyes with the innocent wolf. Something about her presence at the Guard never made sense. Fenris shut her up whenever those questions were raised by me, while August remained completely disinterested. Too disinterested.

“Do I know something you don’t, Mina Harker?” His smile thins the makeup around his eyes. It cracks to reveal the emptiness lurking underneath. “You don’t know about sweet, innocent Abby.” Griffin chuckles. “She’s a fable just like us. Another freak to add to the collection.”

“Abby… What is he talking about? What are you if you are not a wolf?” I ask, careful not to trip over the words as they crawl from my throat.

“Ms Mina.” She sighs as she hobbles to her feet. Her eyes turn to a concerning shade of yellow. “I am wolf. But I am also more. The Council… they would like me kept away from the public.” Her hands rest on the bars, eyes flicking between me and Griffin. “My mother is a witch,” she says with the intensity that only comes with a weighted history. “She was from a long line of witches and wanted me to get into the craft. Sadly, when she realised I had no natural talent for the magical arts, she gave up on me and passed me to my father. He wasn’t aware of me until my mother turned up on his doorstep with me one day.”

“Aren’t families cruel?” Griffin says wistfully, like it’s a romantic notion, not a hauntingly damaging one.

“My father is a werewolf, and I lived with his pack. At my persistence, he agreed to attempt changing me when I was twenty-four.” She tucks lose locks of her blonde hair behind her hair. “I’ve always felt more akin to a wolf than a human or a witch.”

“So he turned you almost a year ago,” I say to move the tale along. Fables always own a tragic origin story that led to their mutations. “What are you, Abby?”

“I am woman. I am wolf. I also have a third, hybrid form where I am both.”

I let that sink in as I conjure the image in my mind. Long bowed legs, lean muscular body, clawed fingers. A long neck that leads to a sharp jaw filled with even sharper teeth.

“You’re a lycan,” I gasp with my hand covering my mouth, barely believing that these words are spilling from me. “But…they are extinct.”

“Not exactly a lycan because I also have a fully formed wolf living in me,” Abby states like this isn’t remarkable information. “The old, original lycans were only this hybrid form. They remained stuck as neither man nor wolf.”

I have to recall my childhood lessons on the histories of different species. The first of the werewolves were called lycans. They are what humans used to depict in their horror movies. The werewolf remained in their human form until the full moon forced them to morph into these warped and grotesque monsters. They were savage and would tear villages apart. Eventually, new strains evolved into what we have now, two separate beings. Those with the lycan strain where exterminated by other supernaturals.

“How did the Council react when you were discovered?” I ask quietly.

“Good question,” Griffin says, stalking toward Abby’s cell. “How did the Council react to you reviving one of the creatures that were rightly made extinct? Was it pride? Was it excitement?”

“I was imprisoned,” she whispers, her voice shaking. “It was a cell not too dissimilar to this one. Thankfully, this place doesn’t reek of piss and decay.”

A shuddering breath chokes out of me. “Of course, they imprisoned an innocent girl,” I hiss under my breath. “They are threatened by you because you are something other than what they understand.”

“The old lycans were killed off because their strain of werewolf was highly contagious. It only took a little scratch on another human, and in the next full moon, they would change into a lycan. I’ve never dared to attempt changing anyone, but the Council theorised that I might be contagious too.”

“Do not defend their deplorable actions, Abby,” I snap. “You are a young woman, and they are some of the eldest of our kinds. They know better.”

Abby nods her head like she agrees with my words. The lifelessness behind her eyes tells me that her heart doesn’t believe she is worthy of forgiveness. The shame of what she is has been branded into her soul. The shame of being a fable.

“I was released when Mr VH intervened and pleaded on my behalf. As part of the deal they struct, I had to be put to good use and to stay under the radar. They imposed their will and forced me to become a member of the Guard, supervised by someone of their choosing. Fenris has been a kind partner to me, and I enjoy learning how to be an investigator.”

“You’re in the custody of Guards?” I ask, struggling with everything I’m being told. “Do they own you?”

“Why are you so surprised, Mina? We are commodities. We have the illusion of freedom and rights. But that’s what it is, an illusion. They use us and then dispose of us when we are no longer needed.” Griffin walks back to my side of the hall. “They would have killed me centuries ago if I were not an immortal. So I’ll remain forever a thorn.”

“Enough with the sob story,” I snap. “Don’t compare your case next to Abby’s. She’s an innocent of happenstance. You’ve always chosen to be the biblical snake. You enjoy finding a weakness to exploit.”

“Even when faced with their villainy, you still defend them. These are the same people who vetoed the vote to keep Dracula alive.”

“Don’t!” I hiss, baring my fangs and letting the red bleed into my eyes. “Everyone keeps throwing around *his* name like it is an inspiring call to arms. I don’t want anything to do with him.”

“Say it again. This time I want to believe you mean it,” Griffin says with disgust.

“Dracula!” I yell at the top of my lungs, slamming my hands against the bars. “Dracula!” This time I let the word swirl around in my mouth before spitting it out. “And for the people who need to remove the wax from their ears, I’ll say it one more time. Drac-u-fucking-la.” My eyes blaze as I stare at the man. I let them flicker past his suit to a whimpering Abby. Her expression is the reminder I need to remain on task and not let my worries keep me imprisoned here.

Stay on task. Her safety is what is important.

Griffin nods his head as he gives me a slow, condescending clap. “Brava, Mina. Brava!”

“Why are we here?” I ask again softly.

“The people I work for –”

“The witches?” I interrupt, pursing my lips in disgust at his choice of company.

“They are collecting everything we need to rise to power and create new leading factions. Out with the old and in with the new.”

“It’s just that simple, is it?” I mock.

“When the attack is a surprise, and the Council is too confident in their allies that they are unprepared, it really is that simple,” the man says with a tone that is beyond arrogant. His belief in being the victor has become an unchangeable fact. “The trick, Mina Harker,” he adds in a low whisper. “You just need to know who is on your side.”

That has my ears pricking at the reveal he just unwittingly gave. There are creatures lurking on the inside, working against their own ruler.

His leather gloves groan, irritating my senses, as he attempts to straighten his suit. “You are the last of the shadow mages. The last of your line. You barely use your shadow magic for its intended purpose. Imagine what you could do if you knew how to perform what your ancestors could. Think about how powerful you would be.”

“You know nothing about my ancestors, their magic or mine.” My fists curl at my side.

“There is no one like you. Like all the fables, you are unique. No one has ever been willing to replicate the magic that made us. No one has been brave enough to test our limits. Everyone has been too terrified to try… until now. These witches want to learn all about your magic.”

My stomach drops as dread fills me, but my feet remain planted in place.

“They want to know more about your abilities and how they can be harnessed for other uses.”

“Like a potion that can cause a person to turn invisible. Or one that can manipulate someone into acting against their will.” Those pieces fall into place.

“So you also know about Enhancer,” Griffin replies, shocked. I button my lip and curse myself for accidentally letting that information slip. I assumed he knew we knew since he seemed to be paces ahead of us. “I was waiting before collecting you, but that idiotic security guard moved up the timeline. I told them to never bring in humans, even for grunt work. Humans are power hungry and can never be trusted.”

I snort at the irony coating that remark.

“I planned to approach you privately to persuade you to join us. Work with us. When I saw you doing your imaginary badge-of-honour-bullshit, I knew we’d come down on separate sides.”

“You’ve been following me,” I groan, head slumping to the bars as my body screams in agony. He hasn’t just been stalking me. I was one of his victims and had no idea about it.

“It’s pathetic how you are just catching on. I’ve been watching you for months to find my way back into your good graces. I needed the right angle and argument that would work on you.”

“You’ve caught me now,” I say, not bothering to lift my head. “What of Abby and August? Why bring them into this?”

“That has nothing to do with me. The coven couldn’t resist capturing the only lycan in existence. However…” He cracks his knuckles before stepping back towards the stairs. “My time here is coming to an end since they have everything they need from me. Plus, I won extra points for delivering you to them.”

There is a heavy silence where he allows me time to face my fate.

Griffin turns and takes the steps back to where he entered.

“Where is August?” I yell, knowing that this is likely the last encounter I will have with him in the near future.

“Goodbye, Mina Harker. I hope our paths never meet again.”

“Tell me where the wolf is!” I scream at his retreating back.

The door slams shut, leaving Abby and me in the muted light again.

“He is a bit of a mood killer,” Abby whispers. I glance at her, then hold my ribs as I collapse to the ground in a fit of morbid laughter.

Chapter 17

Mina

Once our laughter tapers off, we claim the silence for our own purposes. I can't get comfortable, and it's not because I am lying on a hard concrete floor. It's the gnawing in my mind that this confinement is all for show. With my suspicions in tow, I shuffle to the back wall of my cell. My fingers run over the crude wall. It looks worn from years of neglect and moisture from the air down here never drying out.

"It's painted," I mumble as my fingers slide over the render. "It was made to look like this. This isn't natural decay."

How odd.

The render crumbles lightly under my touch. I direct my attention to the grout lines that have been etched out in uneven lines. It's all fake, and if I press my nose close enough, I can catch the stench of the fresh paint.

I check on Abby. She is tapping her foot rhythmically on the ground to a beat I have no chance of figuring out. She's lost in her mind and I doubt she's aware of the dancing limb.

Standing up, I limp back to the bars, letting my forearms rest on the cool metal.

"A penny for your thoughts?" I ask with a limp smile.

"Oh?" she jerks up, eyes widening. "I'm not really thinking about anything specific. It's more that I am considering how little I know about all this." She points at the ceiling then the finger travels around her head, leaving me unsure of her meaning. "I… I was raised in a coven but was mostly treated like a human. When no magical affinity came... the coven really distanced themselves from me. My dad, he already had a family. It was uncomfortable being with them. I was always an outcast."

"I'm sorry that was your childhood."

"With hindsight, I think that my wolf side was blocking any part of me that could have tapped into the magics produced in nature like witches can." She sighs.

“That sounds like a reasonable conclusion. Or it could be the witch part evolved into the lycan part of your soul. Maybe you were meant to be this way.” Those words lighten something within her. There are complicated emotions within her about who she is versus who she should be that are unique to fables. It’s being on the outside looking in, wanting to be part of the people we no longer relate to. Our differences scare them to the point of irrational fear. So they keep us at arm’s length. We stay that way until the hope of acceptance withers away.

“Do you think this… thing in me could be a good thing? It always seemed like a curse. Whenever anyone finds out… it’s never been received well.”

“Abby, the more control you have over your forms, the more power you have. And, in our world, power means respect. You are young, practically a baby. You are reliving your childhood, teething problems and all. Learn control, and everyone will be banging on your door for your allegiance.”

“How did you manage the change when you became…”

I groan, my head falling to rest on my arms. I take a moment to collect myself before meeting the eyes of the eager fable. “Not great. Most would classify it as terrible. I was a mess. Don’t compare our situations. You were born to be magnificent. Whoever made you, they wanted you to be this beautiful creature. Me? I was deformed into a monster of revenge and rage. That combination doesn’t bode well for the outcome of my soul.”

“I heard … I hope this isn’t the wrong thing to say…”

“Go on,” I prod.

“I heard Ms Greta muttering about your feeding issues. How you hate feeding. Is that because of your vampire nature?”

I open my mouth, then snap it shut, trying to figure out how to explain the complexities of the curse of my existence.

“Do you understand what it is to be a fable?” I ask.

Abby nods slowly while looking confused by my question. “They… I mean, we are hybrids of different branches of magic.”

“We shouldn’t exist,” I whisper. “A blip on the definition of impossible. A mage has never survived any attempts at changing into a werewolf. Or been turned into a vampire. There are many recorded deaths where that was the cause. Mages know trying this will lead to their deaths, so they tend to leave the other species alone to remove the temptations of

trying.” My body tires, so the bars become my ally as I lower myself back to the floor and propped against the cell wall. “That’s what makes me a fable. I survived the transformation that no one ever has. I am proud of my mage heritage and the ancestors who came before me. I loved being a shadow mage. Now? Being this… hybrid… I didn’t become two things. My powers were fused together; my shadows and my vampirism are now one entity. Their own brand of magic, you might say. It’s why I am here in this dungeon and not missing my head. These witches want what flows through my veins because there will likely never be anything like me again. Just like how there is nothing like you out there.”

“What does that have to do with feeding?” Abby asks.

“I have digressed a little. My shadows are no longer like those of my ancestors. They changed… evolved. They are something alive. When I consume blood, it affects them. Changes them.”

“I don’t understand.” Abby leans forward, like proximity to me will help clarify my words.

“I barely understand it myself,” I tell her. “When I feed, my shadows take on personality traits of the owner of the blood.” I run a hand over my hair and snag on a mattered mess at the back of my head. “It sounds so bizarre, but that’s the only way I can explain what happens when I consume blood. If the person is shy and reserved, I have to convince my magic to perform basic abilities – it can be very infuriating. Or if the person is hot-headed and cruel, controlling my emotions becomes a hazardous task because the shadows will act without my permission. They tend to be more on the zappy side when I am mad.” I chuckle and rub my forehead. “Sometimes it feels like multiple personalities are swimming inside of me.”

“That’s… whoa, Mina. Wow.”

“Mina?” I snort. “You’ve finally dropped the formality.”

“If you are going to die alongside someone, it’s only proper that you are on a first-name basis,” she counters, though the glint in her expression tells me she believes the opposite.

“Apart from the twins, you’re the only person I have ever told that too. It’s always felt like this overwhelming secret… knowing that these witches want to take and manipulate my magic. It feels like there is more power in owning what I am.”

“I understand your reluctance to feed now. How do you choose who to feed from?” Abby asks.

“I hang out at yoga studios…” I say with a sly smile that makes Abby laugh. “Johannes and I are quite proficient in yoga positions now. Though, we’ve moved onto mindfulness and meditation sessions recently since that’s become a popular thing humans do.”

“The infamous huntress is a mindful yogi. That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard in a long time.” Abby covers her mouth to hide her giggle. “Can I ask you another question?”

“I don’t have anywhere else to be right now. Gather around and pull up a chair,” I say, setting off another round of giggles from the both of us.

It hasn’t taken long for the captivity to turn me to madness.

“Griffin wants to change the world, pull it apart and put it back together in a better way,” she summarises.

“Mmh, that sounds about right. He is foolish to think that his contribution here will be his last. He is as much of a prisoner as we are. He’s just too stupid to realise it.” I can’t stop smirking at that idea. “Also, he’s never been deft at playing politics. He has no idea how quickly this will fall apart. I’ll be there to kick his arse and put him in a cell.”

“I don’t really know how the Council formed and came to power in the first place. My mother wasn’t deeply involved with other supernaturals outside the coven. My father tried to keep me out of it. Since joining the Guard, I have been struggling to wrap my brain around the day-to-day, let alone learning the complexities of our history.”

“Why couldn’t you have asked me something simpler, like the meaning of life?” I drawl.

“That was my next question.” The cheeky bugger grins at me.

“Get comfortable, Miss Abby,” I drawl, mimicking her accent. She rolls her eyes but shifts around until her legs are tucked under herself, back rested against the wall.

“This all happened long before I was born, many centuries before. There are recorded histories that each species keeps with their individual histories. There are some facts they all agree on but many more that they refute.” I close my eyes and let the story play out in my mind.

“Before any of the current social structures existed, each supernatural group was governed by their own peoples in their own areas of the map. Usually, it was the brawn winning over those with brains. Supernaturals roamed the old world, taking over human towns and building their own armies to gain more territories. It’s just like what human societies

were doing; we were more aggressive, and our magics were raw. Not as refined as they are now. Supernaturals didn't only fight amongst themselves but also other species who were a threat to their resources or just because we can be evil and cruel to those who are considered different. Some groups were killed to the point of extinction."

"Really?" Abby gasps.

"Yeah, there are some shifter species that were completely wiped out. There are other regions where supernaturals once existed, but they were forced to leave with the threat of extermination."

"Brutal," Abby whistles. "When did things change?"

"It was the humans," I tell her, imagining the armies filled with endless lines of humans roaming the continents. "Their empires grew, and supernaturals suddenly had targets on their backs. Witches were always the easiest for them to trap because they were humans with magics that relied on pulling from the elements. A pack of shifters could still take down a small army of humans. When faced with waves of never-ending human attacks, thriving turned into surviving,"

"Nice wordplay!"

"I do try," I chuckle. "None of the species can agree on who acted first. Even those who lived during those ancient times refuse to concede that it wasn't them. Anyway, the leaders amongst their stronger groups built communities of supernaturals, all living in the shadows of the human cities. That's how it's been since. Supernaturals thrive in cities filled with other supernaturals because we all keep each other in check. Ashford and the other ruling cities are the only exceptions. There isn't an established coven, den, or pack here because it is populated by those running our government and those in the Guard. It's a tinder box waiting to be lit. So these cities are declared neutral territories, safe for all but not a place to establish roots."

"Why Ashford?" Abby asks, her face scrunching up. "Why not somewhere exciting like New York or New Orleans… or practically anywhere else."

"That's a simple one and something you should have been taught." I frown, not disappointed in Abby but in the lack of her formal training. "Places like Ashford are unique. We don't know where magic came from. Or why any of us exist. Like us, some places around the globe carry a heavy magic signal. They are beacons that call to those of us who don't have strong ties to a community. Mages can easily identify these places by the

boost of energy we receive in the area. That's the main reason the Council claims these places, so no one else can channel the excess of magic."

"I guess that makes sense. That all sounds pretty simple," Abby shrugs, assuming that is the end of the story. "Council sets up on powerful land; Council gets to be the boss of us."

"The Council came later. These underground civilisations were just the beginning because now you have established communities all over the world. Each with its own rule and authority. It might be acceptable for a vampire to feed off other supernaturals in one area and then travel to another to be put to death for the same act. It turned vicious between civilisations. So there was constant warring between these mini societies."

"Ah, so the fighting continued."

"And continued and continued for centuries until there started to be real dominance showing from some of these collectives. To stop infighting, leaders were placed in charge of certain groups."

"I'm guessing that those leaders became the model for what the Council," Abby adds, understanding the significance of that.

"The Council was formed by the strongest of each creature." I don't mention that Greta and Johannes were there, fighting for vampires and their utopian dream of global control. They were vicious and mostly feral until they bonded with me.

"Once the Council was established, the rulers of each species positioned their family members in places of power worldwide to stop uprisings from occurring. Quashing rebellions."

"Ah, good old-fashioned nepotism."

"The very same," I nod. "Then, over time, these families became more about recruiting strength. That came in different forms." I gesture to Abby. "Wolves need dominant alpha wolves to maintain the masses. Those traits are rare and occur randomly in pups. So whenever a strong alpha is found, they were recruited into a Family."

Abby nods sagely. "Give them a little power and stroke of the ego. It keeps them in line."

"Magic users structured their authority differently." I opened my eyes as my hands slid down to my sides to help ease some pain around my ribs. "Mages will always have competition between the different lines of magic. It was agreed to keep them as separate species, like how fae and mages have a lot of similarities but are also vastly different," I say. "That's

why they each get a council chair, but shifters only got one." I shrug hopelessly at the injustice of that. "Magic users are structured by their real family groupings. They ensure all the main elements of magic are represented to create a balance of power." My childhood home was lined with portraits of our ancestors. It was my grandmother's pride and joy. She loved showing off the prosperity of our line. I'm glad she died before she ever learned what happened to me.

"Is the air element the most powerful branch of mage magic? That's who sits on Council?" Abby asks.

"No," I brush away stray feelings from my cheek. "Shadow mages were always considered to be the strongest bloodline. The matriarchs of my family always held the Council seat. My mother was in power until she died. When she died…"

"You're not allowed to have the position because of what you are."

"Yeah…" I sigh. "That was made clear when I returned home and was shunned by everyone, even my own mother. I was never excited to take the mantle of leader. To be honest, I would have been a terrible council member for too many reasons to list. I never expected my family to turn me away when I needed them the most." I smile to force the feeling to overtake the depressing wanting to consume me. "I have the twins now. They will always be home." I clear my throat. "The ruler of the air bloodline scooped up the position when my mother's death caused a power vacuum." There was barely a moment to breathe before he was perched in her seat.

"Griffin was right when he said that families are cruel," Abby mutters, kicking her feet out.

"Griffin is never right," I growl. "People are cruel. That will always be true. Human, mage, wolf, fae… we are all beasts at our core. We are who we surround ourselves with. You will find your tribe, Abby. It may not be who you expect or even what you want, but it will be what you need."

"Thanks, Mina," Abby says. Her words are no longer lively but limp and moving in the direction of defeat.

"I'm getting us out of here," I tell her from my position sprawled on the floor. "And if I can't, there are two feral creatures who will tear down buildings and pull teeth until I am back with them." I don't add that they will know something is wrong due to my lack of contact. I hope Johannes is well enough to be useful if he is needed in this fight.

"Greta and Johannes," Abby says knowingly.

“That’s the joy and curse of the type of bond we have. It will drive them crazy to the point of frenzying if I stay away for too long. Dead or alive, they will have to touch me to calm and soothe the bond.”

“That is intense,” Abby says, but it doesn’t sound judgemental like it usually does. It’s respectful. Something that vampires rarely receive due to who we are and our choice of dinner.

“There is no better word to describe it. Intense,” I chuckle. “If you see them coming, get out of their way. They are ruthless killers and can be blinded by their desire for destruction, especially if I am in the mix of the drama. It’s probably best if you hide until they have calmed down.”

“Oh great! I’m stuck in a cell, and our saviours are berserk vampires who will likely try to kill me,” Abby mocks.

I blink at her in surprise before chuckling. Stress makes her funny.

“We need to make sure August is safe,” I add, and those words wipe all smiles from my lips. I can’t keep him from my thoughts any longer. I was hoping he might be brought down here, but time is ticking, and that doesn’t bode well for whatever situation he is in.

“Can you change into your wolf form?” Before she can open her mouth, I add, “Your wolf form, not the… other one.”

“I sure can, Mina. Though, I won’t be helpful in my wolf form. Are you sure that’s the right idea?”

“Do it.” I wave her off. “Right now, I need your strength more than I need your opposable thumbs. I am about to do something really stupid. And it’s going to hurt a lot.”

“Care to explain?”

“I’m going to try and get someone down here. Get more information, and hopefully trick them into coming close to my cell.”

Abby chews on her plump lower lip before using the wall to help her get to her feet. She strips so I divert my attention to inspecting the rune on the ceiling. Paws hit the ground, and I glance over my shoulder to check she is ready.

“Why did I let myself get so lazy?” I grumble, closing my eyes and pushing my shadows out with the smallest drop of energy remaining within me. My red magic lethargically crawls toward the rune before probing the edges of the marking. A zap hits me, causing me to recoil and hiss.

“It’s just pain. It’s a mental construct for self-preservation. You can push past the pain.” It’s my lame attempt to convince myself that pain

doesn’t hurt, even as my body roars in agony from the unrecovered damage.

I push more energy into my red beauties. They plod around the edges like a dance partner with two left feet.

The rune rejects my infiltration. My magic struggles in its fight. It’s like a drop of oil forcing its way to the depths of the ocean. It’s dizzying and suffocating. The pressure in my head becomes blinding agony. My screams reach the corners of the dungeon as the pressure intensifies behind my eyes.

I should have died so many times tonight. What’s one more time of toying with the string of fate?

The door Griffin entered from swings open violently. A male appears at the top of the stairs. I ignore him and remain focused on breaking the rune.

“Shut up!” he yells with the arrogance and pomp of someone who believes they are in charge. He’s dressed too formally to be on prison duty in his double-breasted suit jacket and navy trousers. His shiny shoes clatter as he descends the stairs. When he reaches my cell, he freezes.

“Hey! What are you doing?” he says when he spies my magic. “Stop that.”

From the corner of my eye, I see him rush forward but hesitate when he is within arm's reach of my cage. His mouth spews mumbled words. My senses can feel the hum in his mutter as magic is spun to counter mine. When his magic reaches the cell, they dissipate. They are rendered useless by the same magic that is tearing my brain in half.

I wipe my nose to clear the blood that is blocking my ability to breathe.

“Damn it!” the man yells as the futility of his magic dawns on him. He forgets his safety as his fists curl around the bars, rattling the lock as he yanks on them.

“Con…tainment… spells…. work… both…ways,” I pant. His fingers dive into his pockets as he fumbles to retrieve the keys. His distraction is what I was waiting for. I race to the bars and grab his wrist, and in a movement too far for him to consider, let alone stop, I sink my fangs into him and take the gulp.

Energy rushes through me, and I don’t let a drop of his blood go to waste. When his body falls limp to the ground, I follow him to the ground and keep drinking until he is a husk.

I straighten, licking my lips as my vampiric healing begins to restore my body and magic to a healthier level. My shadows jump around inside me, itching to cause some mayhem.

I stretch my arms over my head and groan at the lingering ache. “I’m going to need a lot more than a witch to get me to full strength,” I tell Abby, who is now up against her bars, a spark of excitement in her wolf's eyes.

Abby’s wolf paws the ground and gestures to the body. Understanding, I drag the body closer to me and find a swipe card for the cells in his internal breast pocket. Feeling for a swiping thing, the switch beeps when I graze over the column between the cells. The rattle of the bars sliding open is not a sound I’ll forget soon.

I evaluate my body on the way to Abby’s cell and get her freed with another swipe. I eye her wolf form and assess the odds of staying in this form or turning back to human.

“Are you well enough to fight in your wolf form?” I ask. She nods her head. “The problem is communicating with you because I don’t have any pack magic.” This time she gives me a considered look. Without access to pack magic, our communication is going to be limited. “We will have to make do.” I duck into her cell, grab her clothes, tie everything up in her shirt, and throw it over my shoulder. “Stay behind me.”

We climb the stairs, and I hate that she still has a slight limp. She acts like it doesn’t exist and ignoring it will make the pain disappear. I lightly tap on the door leading us out of the cells, and a hollowed echo responds. The door isn’t as heavy as it appears. It is like a prop and not what you’d expect for keeping prisoners locked behind. Leaning closer to the door, a surprising noise greets me.

“Is that… music?” I ask.

Abby shifts closer and cocks her head to the side.

“It’s classical.” The melodies remind me of a time that has long since passed, where this music represented the pinnacle of high society and artistry. Nothing like the techno-shit Johannes forces me to listen to now. “I’d guess it is Bach… though, I’ve never cared to remember the names of composers.”

The door handle crumbles when I squeeze it. Abby huffs excitedly when I show her the metal shards in my hand.

“Who needs to know how to pick a lock when they are like butter under my strength?” What I don’t add is that the materials might as well have been plastic.

I push open the door and allow my vampire claws to show. They strain painfully as I prepare for any upcoming fight that might find us. The music that was a distant thrumming is clearer, along with the lively buzzing of chatter.

We must be as covert as possible, so I send some shadows into the hall to scout for other guards. I panic when they swarm out of me and surge down a hallway with no care for stealth.

“Come back, you fuckers,” I grunt in exertion as I rein them in. Now is not the time to let them play.

The man’s blood pumping through my veins is manic and impulsive. An act first and think later attitude wants to corrupt my thoughts.

Why couldn’t he be a pilates-loving gym junky?

“The hall is clear,” I gasp out once I get my magic under control and lock them inside me. “Luckily, there’s no one out there to witness that.”

We move into a hall filled with dramatic crystal chandeliers and flickering lights meant to resemble candles. The walls are lined with heavy red drapes. When I pull them back, there isn’t a window, just a brick hallway painted like aged stone. No other doors are anywhere in sight.

The music builds with each step. I decide to follow it.

“Does everything here seem very strange to you?” I ask. She cocks her head before glancing around. If wolves could shrug, I think that’s what her reaction would be. So I keep talking. “Everything is made to look like it’s been here for centuries. It’s a poor replica of what an uneducated person would think the 1800s were like. I mean, look at these curtains…” I say, grabbing a handful of the red material. “It’s cheap and has a plastic quality to it. This feels like a movie set where everything looks perfect from a distance, but it’s just a cheap imitation up close.”

Abby nudges the back of my knee, encouraging me to keep moving, clearly not caring for these deviating thoughts.

We turn a corner and end up in a hallway lined with doors. I rush to the first one and put on the handle. It’s locked, and with a few harder tugs, it’s much more secure than the door to the cell. I use my shoulder to try and bust one door open, but I’m halted by a hiss of magic.

“This door is magically coded,” I tell Abby, who is starting to look more panicked.

I rush to the next door and feel for magic. Just like the one before, it has a hostile hum.

“Damn it. This one’s definitely coded.”

After slapping clenched fists on the eighth locked door, I scout the hallway for any obvious route to an exit.

“I guess we are going to have to get closer to the music,” I say, defeated.

I was hoping for a quick and fight-free escape. That seems less likely with each step we make.

“This place feels like something from a children’s fairy tale.” I glance around at the fake, ostentatious aesthetics, and shudder. “Or maybe this is moving into horror movie territory?”

I try another door, and it, too, is locked. I shoulder-check that one, but it remains unbudging. Abby scratches at the door uselessly, but I appreciate the sentiment.

I want to get out of here too, wolf.

The music finishes with a raucous applause and some hoorahs. That noise fades into a melody of laughter and the clinking of glasses as smells of champagne careen toward us. The music strikes up again, sticking to the classical tones of this evening.

“This music reminds me of balls I used to attend,” I say absently. Abby remains unhelpful, nudging me again to continue down this hall.

The next door has me smothering a squeal of excitement as it swings open. My fingers hunt for a light switch, and when they flick one on, the lighting reveals a modern bedroom that’s strewn with the mess of someone preparing for an evening out. The juxtaposition of the fake baroque-styled hall and overly modern bedroom confuses the senses.

I rush into the room with Abby at my heel. Once her tail clears the door, I lock us inside with a pushbutton.

“This lock is a smile mechanism. I wonder if the other rooms were magically locked.” I check the only other door in the room, which leads to a bathroom littered with products.

“Does this feel like a hotel to you?” I ask.

Abby wanders around the room, sniffing items on the floor. I shift to the window and peer through the shutters for clues to where we are.

“We must be on an estate. Look at all these open fields. I think we are facing the back of the building because I can’t see any obvious entries or roads.” I let the shutters close and turn back to the bedroom.

My feet get twisted on something. I untangle myself from the discarded dress and hold it up for inspection. Its level of formality answers some of my questions about this evening since no one ever casually wears a satin floor-length skirt with sequin bodices.

Unless you’re Greta, maybe.

“Change back into your human form,” I tell Abby as I search for another dress in the sea of clothing. I cringe at the sounds of her bones as they snap back into place. Abby remains on her knees as she takes several deep breaths.

“It smells like fae magic in here,” Abby says as she climbs to her feet. Her nakedness doesn’t bother her as she walks around the room and picks at different items.

“Put this on.” I pass her a red dress with gold piping. I found it half hanging on a hanger in a small closet. “It has ties on the bodice, so we can adjust it to fit you.”

Abby steps into the dress and shimmies it up until it's covering her. It’s strapless and shapeless until I start tightening the bodice. Her stunning shape takes form, and the dress looks like it was made for her. She sways side to side, and the dress flutters around her feet, making me think of a phoenix with the way the red and gold shimmer together. Beautiful.

I tear off the ragged remains of my black outfit and store them with Abby’s under the bed. I slip on a sequin skirt and a camisole top that is paired with it.

“It’s been a while since I’ve worn anything so… glamorous,” I say, fingering the sequins on the skirt.

“You look beautiful, Mina,” Abby coos at me like I’m not a beast capable of eating her. I chuckle and shake my head. “Lucky these dresses are long because none of these shoes will fit.” She holds up a long stiletto and glances at our feet. “These are a size ten. I doubt they would be close to fitting either of us.”

“Our shoes are going to look strange under these gowns. But that’s all we’ve got,” I agree, my toes curling in my shoes. “The escape plan is evolving,” I say, edging towards the door. “We are going to play dress up and sneak into this gathering to find out what we can about August. It

sounds like there are a lot of people here, so hopefully, blending in won't be an issue. If we cannot integrate ourselves into the party, we will come back here to devise another plan."

"Oh!" Abby squeaks. "I thought… like maybe… we'd… you know, run. Get away from the people keeping us in captivity. We could then send people back to find August." Abby looks away bashfully, tucking a piece of her hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry, that is a very cowardly thing to say, isn't it?"

Grabbing her shoulders, I make sure she is staring at me. "Surviving is not cowardly."

She nods, so I walk to the window, adjust the shutters slightly, and gesture outside. "We could climb out of this window and make a run for it. What I didn't mention before is that there is a magical barrier about forty yards away. It's probably harmless, but I have no doubt that it will set off some kind of alarm." I take a moment as Abby joins me at the window.

"I can't see anything," she says, not denying my claim but more her own observation.

"Trust me, it's there. If we want to make an easy getaway, I need more blood. I don't like our odds against this building full of partying supernaturals without another meal to give me a boost." I turn to Abby and soften my stance to deliver a scary truth. "If we leave August and he is here, they could move him, and our hunt for him will become insurmountably harder."

"Okay." Abby's shoulders are pushed back as she struts to a vanity mirror mounted above a desk. "Be brave, Abby," she whispers. Her heart thunders as she does some trick with her hair that ties it in a tight knot on the top of her head. "Let's attend this party in this creepy building and find you a meal. First, we must fix your hair and find you some makeup for the bruises. Even for a vampire, you are unusually pale. And –" she adds as she plucks something from my hair, "shards of glass don't make nice hair accessories."

Chapter 18

Mina

We exit the hotel room back into the hallway decorated in faux period charm. I take the front position, and Abby stays tight at my back.

“We haven’t stumbled on anyone yet. No one seems to be searching for the dead guy in the cells. Lady luck is on our side,” Abby twitters in my ear.

“Never mention that bitch to me,” I hiss as the melody lures us toward it.

“Wait, she’s real? You’ve met her?” Abby grabs my arm like she forgot how serious this moment is and wants to stop and have a chat. I shrug her off and keep moving.

“Yeah, I know her.” I won’t elaborate because she’s not worth a moment of my contemplation. Just another potential future villain I am sure I’ll have to come up against one day.

Fucking fae hybrid.

I shove my body back against the wall when we reach the end of the hall. My magic is still tearing around inside of me, excited at the idea of causing chaos with such a big audience. Since they are only motivated by initiating trouble right now, they are useless to me.

Peering around the corner, I’m confronted with a flashback from hell. Except, it’s not a flashback– it’s real.

“This is… old-fashioned,” Abby says, peeking past me, making me snort at the term. “Why are they dressed like they are in a Jane Austin novel?”

Corsets, petticoats, and top hats. The only non-traditional part of most people's attire is the modern hairstyles and dramatic makeup that only people wear nowadays. “Our dresses seem too modern. Do you think that will draw attention?”

“This is just another piece of this maddening puzzle that doesn’t make sense. What do you get from the scents?” I ignore her question about the unwanted attention because it’s too late to back out now.

“Humans with magic…Witches.” She takes another breath. “There’s definitely some fae here. There’s fresh blood, so that means vampires.”

“Any wolves?” She nods as her eyes try to locate them in the crowds.

“August?” I ask a little, too, hopefully.

Abby pauses. “Maybe…” Her eyes focus as she takes in another breath. “August.” Her heartbeat speeds up. “I can smell him, but it’s very faint.” She takes in another deep breath. “I think I am smelling someone who has recently been in contact with him. If an older wolf were here, they could pick him out easier. I’m still learning how to differentiate scents.”

“You’re doing amazing, Abby. That’s more than I would be able to achieve.” I give her a reassuring smile. “We need to find this person who has been with August.” I hum to myself, considering our options. “Amendment to the plan. We find them. Take them back to the room we just came from and interrogate them until we get answers. Once we have August, we get the hell out of here.”

“Okay,” Abby replies, not as confident as I’d like her to be in the plan. I should just be grateful that she at least agreed to it.

“Are you ready?” I ask. The question flicks an internal switch in her that activates the Guard operative, transforming her bubbly personality into a mask of determination.

With all the confidence inside me summoned, I step around the corner. My skirt swishes, and the sequins catch the lights from each different source.

Abby finds my left with a dainty smile painted on her lips. Only her twitching nose shows that her hunt is on.

“I’m getting something over there.” She lightly pats her hair bun and subtly tilts her head to the back of the room. “The scent is mixed with a woman.”

“Drink.” I link my arm through Abby’s while whispering reminders to stay calm. “Your spiking heartbeat will call attention to the vampires in the room. Take in some deep, slow breaths.” I guide her to the opposite side of the room to a bar lined with glasses.

“Champagne, ma’am,” a male asks as he extracts the bottle from an ice bucket.

“Two,” I reply, tracking his movements as he skilfully pours each glass.

He slides the two crystal glasses toward us before receiving orders from the woman waiting behind us. I lift both glasses and inspect the bubbles as the air forces each pocket to the surface and pop to produce an enticing smell.

I pass one off to Abby. “Let’s go fishing.”

We weave through the guests to the back of the room, smiling as we walk past groups. The music provides a background to the chatter, but no one is paying attention to the orchestra.

I keep my arm tightly linked with Abby’s, and she manages to calm her heartbeat. I glance at our feet, grateful our shoes aren’t peeking out and giving away our game.

“Those people over there,” Abby says with another sly tuck of her hair. “It’s a female in that group.”

The group is laughing with a dignity that is only entitled to the wealthy while sipping their beverages like this is the moment to be alive. They either don’t know or don’t care that there were supernaturals held captive in some cosplay basement.

“When will he be arriving?” a woman asks as she checks herself in a compact mirror. It snaps closed before she eyes off the group.

“Patience, my dear. You know he loves showing off with a late entrance,” a man replies, bored. He pulls out a pocket watch, which is bizarre because he is also wearing a smartwatch. He checks the antique piece for the time before slipping back into his breast pocket.

“He *is* a showman, after all,” another woman says, laughing with a hint of manic flirtatious energy that triggers my instinct to step in front of Abby.

We slowly walk around the group, pointing at artworks on the walls. Abby squeezes my arm.

“It’s that fae woman. The one with white hair that’s braided down her back. She is in the pink dress.”

I follow her line of sight and return the squeeze to tell her I’ve located the target.

The woman is beautiful. Her glamour is perfectly crafted to morph her alien features into a vision of flawless beauty. Two long plaits run down her back and sway gently with every tune of laughter.

“Follow my lead.” I build a laugh until it’s hysterical and drag Abby around by her arm with an overproduced level of excitement. I swing her

around and push her into the female we need to speak to. My glass of champagne follows the movement of Abby's body and splatters down the side of her glistening pink dress.

"I'm sooo sorry," I giggle. "Cynthia, you are such a clutz sometimes. You should apologise to this nice woman." I make sure she can see my fangs so she doesn't linger too longer on what species I am.

Abby's eyes bug from her head in genuine horror at what I just did. Her anxiety helps keep the act real.

The fae snarls at us. *Not so nice then.*

"Fucking vampire. And what? A filthy wolf? Who let this rabble in?" She glares at the people surrounding her, expecting an answer. She turns her daggers on us when they remain quietly amused at her tantrum.

"Look what you did to my dress. It took eighty-nine brownies to hand-stitch this masterpiece of couture. Months of work have been wasted because *you* don't know how to behave with decorum. What am I going to do with a ruined dress?"

"Oh my," I gasp and clasp my chest, channelling my inner Abby. "We are so dearly sorry, ma'am. Please, let us help you clean up this remarkable dress." I plaster on a timid smile that I direct to the others watching. I bow respectfully, then grab the fae by the hand and wrap my arm around her waist to usher her away.

"If we go to the bathrooms, I am sure there will be a towel there to help clean some of this up," Abby says, even as she directs us away from the sign that would lead us to those facilities.

The woman snarls at Abby but doesn't resist us, believing we will clean her up. When we reach the door, she huffs and gives us a condescending look with matching crossed arms.

"This is not my quarters."

Her words verify what I was thinking before; this is some kind of hotel.

Abby grins when I pull a face behind the fae's back before swinging open the door. I shove the fae inside our newly claimed room. She stumbles over the train of pink fabric attached to her extravagant dress. She hops on one foot until she has unwound herself and then stands tall like she owns this moment with hands on her hips.

"What is the meaning of this?" Her glamour drops, exposing sharp venomous teeth and warped, wide eyes. Her ears and nose become

dangerous points. Her beauty is still remarkable and should be treated with the same respect as white oleander.

“Those rough hands will be robbed from your body if you touch me again, vampire.” She still does not understand how compliantly she wandered into our trap. “You clearly don’t know who I am. I am cousins with the king. They will string you up by your feet for this and lash you until no blood is left in your filthy bodies.”

“Did you hear that,” I scoff. “She knows a member of the Council.” I roll my eyes before glaring at her. “Like it’s hard to know a member of the Council. Or being related to fae royalty. You all breed like rabbits.”

Her head cocks to the side, finally recognising she is engaging with two walking, talking people and not gum under her shoe. Her foot slides back toward the door as her cat-like eyes search the space.

Abby blocks her exit by casually leaning against the door.

“You’ve been with a wolf we are searching for. Where is he?” Abby asks, cutting straight to the point.

“Whatever do you mean?” the fae replies. Her glamour is returned, making her appear entirely non-threatening.

Abby steps forward. “Two can play the pretend game.” She violently snarls as her jaw deforms into what must be the mouth of her lycan form. The savageness of her features steals my breath. She becomes far more terrifying than I ever considered her to be.

Drool slides from Abby’s mouth as she displays a deadly row of teeth. They are not sharp like the fae's but much more damaging due to the powerful jaw they are set in.

“Enough, Abby,” I hiss, becoming more fearful of her than I want to acknowledge.

Abby blinks as her hands shoot up to her face. That painful cracking is becoming the theme of the night, and Abby groans once her mouth returns to its human form.

“Let’s all agree to stay in our more savoury forms. Okay?” I eye off Abby because the fae cannot scare me, but I am beginning to realise that Abby can.

“I’d like to return to the party. So, if you’ll please excuse me.” The fae bats her eyes at me like she was not threatening us mere moments ago.

“Cut the shit, fae. You will answer the question. Where is the wolf you’ve been with tonight?”

“It’s rude not to introduce yourself… I am –”

“No names,” I snap. Names lead to bargaining, and bargaining with fae leads to more trouble than anyone deserves.

“Fine,” she says with the demure tone absent. “I’ve socialised with some wolves this evening while enjoying the frivolities. Which one are you inquiring about? I can orchestrate an introduction.”

“This is already exhausting. Where is August Andino? The werewolf you reek of.” I take a step closer, and she steps backward to counter me. My foot finds the train of her dress. I step on it to stop any further retreat. Abby stands by me, arms hugging her chest, acting not as self-assured as when we entered the space.

“Are you okay?” I mutter under my breath.

“When I am emotional, it can be hard to control my other side. I’m sorry.” Abby looks devastated as she stares at the ground. I grab her hand and squeeze it.

“Please remove your dirty shoes from my gown. You’ve already damaged it enough,” the woman snaps, unaware of our quiet conversation.

“Where is August?” I take a step closer and show here my filthy shoes before wiping them on her dress.

She bristles. “He’s a gift for Mercurio,” the fae relents when she realises she’s not getting out of here without answers or a clean dress.

“A gift,” I test the words. They are ash on my tongue. That’s the weirdest thing I’ve discovered all night, and I’ve been locked in a cell and discovered a coup is actively on its way to erupting.

Abby gasps as her fists ball at her sides and her head shakes to the point of near violence. A vicious snarl cuts her lips. The reaction from Abby allows me to recognise the truth in the fae’s words, even as they continue to confuse me.

The woman gulps. “I can… I’ll take you to him if you spare me from your wrath.”

“Who is Mercurio?” I ask.

The woman trembles like a leaf, but her shifting eyes tell me it’s an act. Fae always have something up their sleeves. Her mouth softens as she decides that her life is on the line, and she will hunt for a way to bargain out of this situation.

“If you let me live, I’ll help you save your wolf.” Now she sounds like a fae again, looking for that weakness to exploit and bargain with.

When I glance at Abby, she’s shaking with a suppressed rage.

“What’s wrong, Abby?” I ask.

She ignores me. A stillness overtakes her as yellow wolf eyes meet the fae’s. The room, the world, becomes eerily quiet because of the creature lurking within Abby. She swallows a few times with fluttering eyes. The wolf disappears, and back is the gentle twenty-five-year-old woman.

“Abby, what is happening to you?” I ask.

“It’s the anger, Mina. There are too many stimulants here. I’m not feeling my best at pushing aside the darker emotions that fuel my *other* form.”

One more thing to add to the insanity of this night.

“Okay…Do you know what she is talking about?” I ask Abby to redirect us back to what has somehow become the simpler issue.

“Mercurio was August’s old master.” Abby stares at the woman. “I know that he was killed. You are lying.”

“Smell me. I do not lie, little wolf. Mercurio has the same name as his father. The son wants retribution for the father’s death. He blames that wolf for all the troubles that have become of their family line.”

“What master? What is going on?” I ask, hating that I am suddenly out of the loop. Abby's mouth is agog as a flickering of confusion and sadness touches her features.

“You were there. I’m certain that I read you were the one to kill Mercurio and save August from captivity. Do you not remember? I thought…”

Fenris’ words from that awful human's home come back about August’s and I reuniting. Embarrassment fills me, followed closely by shame at not considering August’s position in the Guard. Why is he so dominant? Why doesn’t he have a pack when he is dominant enough to rule a region, potentially claiming the council seat? Why don’t I know about a wolf carrying an age like his?

Why didn’t he say anything? Unless he was waiting for me to acknowledge our past first.

Maybe he doesn’t remember me either – though that sounds like the least likely option.

“I saved him?” I repeat. “Saved him from what exactly?”

“You saved him from a collector who had him as part of their menagerie. From the files I’ve read, there was an investigation into the

disappearance of a female vampire. You were part of the team of Hunters sent to subdue any security forces before the investigators could perform their interrogations. It was a fae named Mercurio who kidnapped the vampire and placed her in his menagerie."

Her words drag a memory forward. It was half a century ago, I think. This fae, Mercurio, had beast magic, so he could control any being with any animalistic part of their soul. He had developed an obsession with a vampire colleague because of her unique purple eyes. She went missing, and as she was a close associate of the vampire council member, finding what happened to her was a high priority. Abby was right. I was sent to back up a team of investigators, along with a few other hunters. We expected to find a solid lead into creature trading. None of us expected to find a shocking variety of rare animals and supernaturals locked in cages.

Those eyes. There was a wolf chained to a throne-like chair.

How could I ever forget that case?

A wolf was kept by the side of the Collector as a constant companion. It was a sick version of a pet since the wolf was wrapped in a silver harness. The fae controlled the beast's body and intention, but the time in captivity hadn't smothered the wolf's will. The resistance in his eyes was thrilling. The moment we broke Mercurio's control over the wolf, he attacked him. There are rare times in my life when bile is forced into my throat. Watching that fae be torn apart, intestines strewn across the floor was one of those moments. Not even the bravest of Hunters was willing to get between the wolf and his prey, and, honestly, none of us wanted to.

"The werewolf in chains was August?" I say slowly. "I wasn't there for the removal of the supernaturals and had no idea about any of their rehabilitation back into society. I just moved on to the next case. It never occurred to me to…"

"Revisit any of the people from your old cases."

It's not cold the way Abby says it, but shame strikes regardless. This wasn't the only time I faced the worst of our kind and never bothered to check in on those who may have needed my resources.

I will have to deal with these feelings later, so I push them aside and focus on what's important – finding August and getting out of here.

"Where is August?" I ask, stalking toward my target. "Is he still in this building?"

Her thick eyelashes bat up. "If you spare me –"

“I’m not negotiating with you until I have the wolf back. The longer it takes for you to reveal his location, the bargain we strike will not end up well for you.”

“Do you say you’d like to bargain?” she says excitedly, glamour flickering off to show her real face again.

I sigh as a hand runs down my face. I’m exhausted. I’m starving. I’m not having another moment of delay. I scowl at her.

The fae knows she’s pushed me too far because she sinks to her knees with her hands clasped in front of her, begging. My fangs descend at the delicious sight.

“We don’t have time for this.” I leap and pin her on the carpet before my fangs sink into her throat's soft, inviting skin. My hunger surges, making this kill brutal and in no way efficient.

When I surface for a breath, I catch the reflection of Abby in the mirror shaking her head in dismay.

“How are we going to find him now?” The hands-on-hips make her seem more formidable than her trembling body would lead you to believe.

The magic in fae’s blood is the boost I need. Everything inside me stitches back together, bones snap into place, and my shadows surge around me, wrapping me in my hood. I throw my head back and roar as her blood soils my magic into believing they are invincible and perfect.

My shadows whisper in my mind, telling me they want to find August.

Trust us

I close my eyes as they surge into the room, hunting for August in every crook and cranny.

“He’s not in this room,” I say, exasperated at having to explain that aloud.

We will find him.

They don’t let me consider objecting to their hunt, and it takes sheer raw willpower to stop them from coming into contact with Abby and harming her in their furore.

I force them to fade to only taint the air with a watery red so they aren’t easily spotted before letting go of control. They escape underneath the door and begin forcing their way into the cracks around all the locked doors. They might be a punishment on my control, but they are efficient as they do in minutes what Abby and I have yet to do.

“Upstairs. Second bedroom on the right,” I announce as I prepare to leave.

I turn back to Abby, who is, for some reason, on her knees, running her hands up and down the dead fae’s body.

“What are you doing?” I ask, stunned enough that the distraction allows my shadows to ignore my instruction and darken back to their natural shade of red. “Is stealing from the deceased now Guard procedure? Do I need to report you to their human resources personnel?”

“They are called creatures and culture now…”

Creatures and *culture*.

“Abby, why are you feeling up the dead woman?”

“I’m not!” she squeaks, shaking her head like I’m the one being odd. “Well, I am… I’m searching for a phone.”

“Ooh...Oh! That’s a good idea. Continue with your pat down,” I nod, giving my approval. Her lips quirk in amusement, but it doesn’t last as she leans back on her knees and sighs.

“Nothing.”

“We should check this room for a phone.” I move to the nightstand by the bed while internally berating myself for not thinking about that earlier. This proves how rusty my skills have become since I can’t remember the basics of my training. Look for a means of communication to get help. My determination to find August is smothering any logical thoughts. The dead body by my feet confirms that.

“Um, Mina, I have already done that. No phones in here.”

Having wasted enough time in this room, I march to the door and swing it open.

“You’re covered in blood,” Abby calls as I enter the hall.

I growl at my dishevelled gown. The clothes we’d already changed out of are crusted in tonight's events, and the idea of spending another moment trying on clothes is unbearable.

“I’m going for formidable.”

Chapter 19

Mina

The shadows lead us to a second set of stairs at the back of the building, the type built for staff to use and remain unseen as they go about maintaining the property.

Abby stays at my back, and we stop when the magic pools around a heavy wooden door wrapped with wrought iron straps.

“He’s in here?” I ask the shadows, and they caress me in confirmation. I test the door, and it is as flimsy as the door leading to the cells. A standard lock is all that’s standing in our way to August.

Taking a deep breath, I recall my magic and let them wrap around me, creating my costume while a few strands rush the lock mechanism. The lock shatters with their force, opening the door.

“Oh gods! He’s caged,” Abby gasps and verbalises something that I can barely comprehend.

August is partially dressed and coated in layers of blood crust from the car accident. They didn’t even allow him the dignity of a cage that allowed full movement. His shoulder grazes the top of the cage as he kneels in an uncomfortable posture.

August’s eyes dart up in a deranged fury as we enter the room. He bares large canines, and clawed fingers wrap threateningly around the bars.

He doesn’t see me, his partner of a few hellish days, but another threat that’s come to rob his freedom.

Abby moves around me, causing August to let out a thundering snarl. She cowers, her legs shaking as she bows to the ground. Her tail would be tucked under her body, and her stomach scraping the carpet if she were in wolf form. Even my feet drag through the air as I struggle against the power burning off him.

I step in front of her to take the brunt of the dominate energy. When it finally wanes, I drag her out of the room.

“Stay out here,” I whisper to Abby as we reach the hall again.

“I can help you,” she says while edging further down the hall and away from the dangerous beast. Her instincts are clearly screaming at her to get away from the alpha in chains. The lycan side seems completely absent, not rising to the challenge like it was when confronting the fae woman.

This is the first time I have glimpsed this version of August. He has accrued a lot of power thanks to his long years. This is why the rulers of his kind don’t know what to do with him and why he is on the outer edges. He is a threat to all if no one can bring him to heel. I have not met many werewolves that can easily radiate such strength, especially in a weakened state. Galen would be one, along with a few others in his inner circle.

“There are some heavy drapes in the hallway. Hide behind them. I’ll get you when…” The horror in front of us is not something Abby should have to shoulder. She shouldn’t have to brunt the rage of the ancient being.

I close the door behind me, taking a deep breath I survey the space. The room is stuffed with as many chairs as possible. It’s not put together like any of the other rooms we’ve been in. There is a soda vending machine sitting next to one that has snacks. A microwave is sitting on a small bench top.

“This is a private quarter for staff,” I summarise. “Why is he being kept here?” I shake that question off because it’s not worth considering right now.

I sink to my hands and knees and crawl to the cage in a display of respect. I refuse to submit to him and give him power over me, but by coming to his level, I can show that I am not a threat to his safety.

My shadows pull away from me and twitter around the cage as they probe different ways to break the hinges.

The wolf corrupting the man’s body stays frozen. Only his eyes track my movement.

“August,” I coo. “You have to come back to me.” My voice cracks and a tear escapes my control. “I’m sorry they did this to you.” I squeeze my eyes shut to prevent any further tears from leaking. “Damn it, August, it should have never got this far. But I need you like right now… I need the calm August to help me get us out of here.”

My palm has a mind of its own when it reaches between the bars to cup his cheek. He growls but doesn’t attack or move. I reclaim his gaze and know he will only respond to strength. My shadows join my hand then they

slowly work their way over him. Caressing him, comforting him. I keep his eyes. “Please, August. Please. I need you. Abby needs you.”

The wolf’s snarl builds. When he tries to shift away from me, I grab his chin and bare my own teeth.

“Fuck you, wolf. I don’t need your madness. I need the man. Give me the damn man!”

He struggles against my pinching hold before he shakes his head.

“Mina?”

“August,” I sigh, releasing him from my grip. “We can’t keep meeting like this.” I give him a limp smile as my heart aches knowing this isn’t the first time I’ve seen this proud man in such a vulnerable state.

“You came for me.” August seems surprised. I ignore that comment and focus on the plan.

“We need to get you out of here.” My shadows react on their own accord like they are waiting for a cue. They swarm the cage and dissolve the joints holding it together until the metal collapses in on August.

“You couldn’t have been more careful,” I hiss. They flitter in joy at August’s freedom while ignoring my snark because they are now under the influence of entitled arrogance.

I shuffle to August and take on some of the weight of the metal off his body. He kicks the bars away with his feet.

“I don’t want to rush you, but we can’t waste a second. Abby and I have been here long enough, and I suspect our good fortune will end soon. We need to find a way to escape,” I tell him, standing.

The man takes in a deep breath while remaining unmoving on all fours. He glances at the wreckage of his confinement and shudders.

“August, now is not the time to be weak.” My voice would be convincing if it lacked the frantic whimper at the end. I stare at the back of the door while I swallow back the emotion. “You can fall apart when we are far from here.” *Like I certainly will be.* “I’ll even buy you a beer, and we can talk for hours or just spend time in silence. Or never speak to each other again.” *I hope not.* “I don’t really care.” *I really do care.* “But right now, I need your strength to help me protect Abby.” *Please help me. Please.*

August sits back so he is propped up on his knees, looking at anything but me.

Defeat soaks the man to his core. The poison of that emotion is secreted from every pore.

I offer him a hand.

We stare at the offered limb, knowing this is more than a polite gesture. This is our promise.

Our word.

We are doing this together.

A limp hand accepts my own. I squeeze his hand as I nurture our connection.

“Don’t you dare let anyone see you fall into darkness, August Andino.” I throw his words back at him. The same ones he inspired me with. “I won’t allow anyone to witness a dent in your pride.”

The flicker of a flame hidden in his gaze bursts into an inferno as I help him climb to his feet. When he is steady, I move to a window and check to see if it opens.

“Thank you, Mina.” His voice wobbles before he clears his throat. I wave him off, so I can take a moment to swallow the lump lodged in my throat. I peek outside, not wanting to address whatever just transpired between us.

“Is there a plan?” August asks as he searches the room. He checks a door and grunts approvingly. He returns with a clean shirt and a pair of track pants. He tears off his destroyed top and trousers before inspecting his body.

“How bad are your injuries?” I ask, not taking my eyes off the dark landscape.

“Fine,” he snaps, sliding the clean shirt over his head. The blood on his chest is quickly absorbed by the new shirt. I stomp over to him and try to lift the edge of his shirt. He removes my hands and places them back at my sides. “What is the plan, Mina?” He pulls on the pants. Both items are stretched to the point of humour as they struggle to cover him.

“Grab Abby from the hall. We are jumping from this window,” I instruct him while moving back to the window and gauging the time by how light the sky is. I used to be so in tune with the hours of the night. Thanks to my reliance on technology, my instincts are more than rusty. I do know it’s after midnight, so I have a maximum of four hours to find a safe place to sleep. Returning to the apartment does not seem possible within such a tight timeframe, and not knowing where we are.

“No, we can’t leave yet.” The deep husk of August’s voice pulls me from my musings. “We have to discover who is behind this.”

“August,” Abby objects as she enters the room sheepishly, clearly not hiding as I asked her to. “We must –”

“He’s right,” I whisper as my head leans on the cool glass. “Your part here is done, Abby. We should have never let you come with us to meet Griffin. We can’t do anything about the past, so you are now part of this investigation. August and I are only at the beginning of our hunt. We need to find out who is orchestrating all of this.” I twist my neck without taking my head off the glass because it’s the only thing keeping me standing. “Are you with us, Abby? Otherwise, you can find somewhere safe to hide until we retrieve you.”

“I will not leave you,” Abby says, a stubborn tilt to her chin. “Safety in numbers is a saying for a reason.”

“I don’t want a fight. This is for reconnaissance only. I’ll welcome as much support as I can get. Though, don’t start getting ideas that it is acceptable for you to be putting yourself in danger on a regular basis.” I lift my head and face off with August. “There are over a hundred supernaturals down there getting their jollies on.”

“Jollies?” August questions like that’s the important part and not the staggering amount of people between us and answers.

“There is some event happening,” I explain. “So far, a male witch and a female fae have been disposed of. No one was searching for them when we came up here. I don’t know how long we have before that fortune runs out.” I allow some of the manic energy from my magic to possess me, it forces me to straighten, and it awakens my weary body. “What do you propose we do?”

The fight in his eyes is reminiscent of a gladiator in the pits before the fight. No matter the odds, this man, this wolf, will come out of this alive. Not unscathed, but alive enough to continue his fight another day. I’m glad I’m on his team right now.

He blinks and back is the steady river I’ve come to enjoy flowing through my rocky rapids. “We observe what we can. When things get heated, we make a break for it.”

“I’d prefer a specific time limit for the search,” Abby mutters, which August and I ignore.

“And if we are found?” I ask, moving toward the door.

“We fight.”

I nod my agreement and prepare to leave this room, knowing it will haunt my mind whenever it drifts.

“That is it? That is your plan! It feels a little absent of any hope. And structure… And weapons… and escape routes,” Abby says with that frantic wobble in her voice. I chuckle and shake my head.

“Tell me what you’ve learned so far. What is the layout of this place?” August asks.

I give him a basic run down of this hotel and our limited knowledge of the layout. He nods along, processing the information.

“Ready?” I ask, my hand resting on the handle.

My shadows cover me in my cape. August comes up behind me, his hands tense and eager and ready to shift into deadly weapons.

“Ready,” Abby replies. She seems to have regained a tight control over her emotions since finding August. Knowing what is lurking under her sweet exterior gives me a boost of confidence. She’s so impressive and has no clue how formidable she will become. For some disturbing reason, I hope to witness her unleash the beast tonight.

Chapter 20

Mina

“There was an internal balcony on the third floor,” Abby says after we’ve cleared a hall. “It might have a good view of the ballroom below.”

I nod and lead our group further into the heart of the building and back toward the classical music, which gets louder with every step.

Abby was right.

I round a corner, and an open balcony presents the perfect location for us to spy on the gathering below. We space ourselves behind the ornately carved columns that are equally spaced apart at the base of the balcony.

I peer down at the mass of people. They have progressed from polite conversation to dancing in ballroom formations.

“Ah heck.” I am wide-eyed as I meet Abby’s gaze. The number of people in the room has doubled in our brief time helping August escape.

“That’s a lot more people,” she mouths. I nod because no response is adequate for expressing my horror at the mass of supernaturals below. There is no way two wolves will get any clear scents of anyone suspicious with this many people around.

I assess my blood-stained dress and then glance over at Abby, who is still in her strapless gown covered in a shimmer of sweat. Her hair is falling apart, and not in an appealing way, but in a way that exposes her fight for her life. Not good. I check on August, whose shirt is wetter with blood than it is clean and dry. There is no chance of us sneaking down there in disguise again.

“What?” August grumbles when he catches my unimpressed glare.

“How are you still standing? Abby said you took the brunt of the accident.” I’m unable to resist my curiosity anymore.

“I changed into my wolf form. It fixed a lot of my damage.” August shrugs, making it clear he no longer wants to discuss it.

“In that cage? How did you have space…” Abby’s mouth snaps closed as she forces her attention back to the dancing party below.

There is a sweetness coating air like too many scented candles has been lit, all with a different sweet scent. The dancing becomes rowdier with each passing minute. Liquid spills and slosh from glasses, coating people's clothing and the ground. One song ends with a rambunctious cheer before another begins.

The room fills with pungent wafts of alcohol. The fact that I can get such a clear scent of the alcohol at this distance makes me concerned about the level of intoxication below.

Someone drops a glass, and it shatters on the wooden floor. No one reacts. Nothing. Everyone continues to laugh as they swirl around the floor. A waiter rushes over and hands the person missing a beverage a new glass.

It’s chaotic yet also like a beautiful performance piece.

The music builds to a crescendo before it fades perfectly in time as a new couple enter the room. The dancing ceases immediately as all heads turn to the arriving guests.

The air dries out, so I lick my lips to bring back some moisture.

This couple is magnetising. Intriguing. People I want to meet.

I want to learn them – the lines of their bodies and the angles of their minds. I want to talk to them, touch them… kiss them.

I blink and shake off those thoughts, but they insidiously linger in my mind.

I want them. Even my fangs want to test the limits of their most intimate veins.

The crowd parts as they glide toward the centre of the room. Like it’s composed music, everyone edges to the sides of the room to form a circle.

The couple twirl in a slow-moving arch that presents all their sides to the crowd, who eagerly applaud the show. Some even cheer before noise is crushed by anticipatory silence.

“Do you recognise those people?” I whisper to August and Abby.

“No,” August mouths to me. Abby shakes her head as her eyes cannot stray from the couple.

“They are so beautiful,” Abby gushes.

“They must be important if they are taking centre stage in a room full of big egos,” I mutter as I think back to the fae I drained.

I wish I had my phone to update Greta with the details of this event. She might even know who this couple is.

She could introduce me to them.

Serving staff dressed in black uniforms scamper forward and place a chaise in the centre of the circle. The man removes his jacket and folds it before laying it on the back of the seat. It's a performance of perfection, and I want to rebel against its confines.

No… you find it captivating. You want to know his folding techniques. He can recommend some tips for me to implement in my closet.

He adjusts his cufflinks as the woman swooshes towards the chaise. She daintily perches on the edge of the seat and stares up at the man with this raw, starving hunger. Her tongue flicks out to trace the curve of her lips. For some reason, my tongue follows the same path around my mouth.

Another server in black emerges with a silver tray holding two glasses of a pale pink sparkling drink. The man takes both glasses and hands one off one to the woman. He sips his drink, unfazed by it, but when the pink liquid passes her lips, she moans in an elated ecstasy before taking a greedier gulp.

"Oh my goodness!" Abby gasps. I force my eyes to obey my command to check on her. Her cheeks are blushed in an appalling shade of red, her pupils dilated as her hands fist her skirt.

"Abby?" I whisper. "Talk to me. Are you –" My thoughts are muted when the woman moans again.

She finishes the drink and throws the empty flute to the ground. It shatters.

Well, I hear it more than witness the glass smashing because when my eyes refuse to budge off her face.

She's everything I want to be.

She stands, and in one swift movement, the male steps forward. He grips her bustier above her breast and tears it open before her undergarment gets the same rough treatment. She moans, and the crowd applauds as her breasts tumble free. Her nipples harden as they greet the applauding party.

I wipe my forehead to clear the beads of sweat forming as the room heats to a stifling intensity.

The male finishes disrobing the woman with a sharp tug of the skirt of her dress, and it willingly gives into the command and tumbles to the floor. The naked woman laughs with her arms wide as she brazenly twirls for the crowd. On completing her parade, she sinks to her knees, eyes excited for the next step of this dance.

The man shifts closer to her so she can easily reach for his belt. It's quickly removed and thrown away before she focuses on unbuttoning his trousers.

"Ww…We should not be watching this," Abby says with a pained breath just as the woman takes hold of the man's cock and slips it between her plump wet lips. He groans as he thrusts into the warmth she provides him, and she moans at his taste on her wickedly curious tongue.

"I… what is this?" August asks, clearing his throat.

I close my eyes and let them recover until the clarity of my thoughts returns. When I can blink them open, I turn away from the acts below and focus on my companions. The outrage on August's face is grotesque and unexplainable.

Why would he be disgusted by something so elegant?

Abby seems ready to dive in and join the tryst, and if she joins in, then it's only fair that I should also join them.

My eyes slide back to the couple. My hands grip my thighs as I'm struck with how long it has been since I've allowed intimacy into my life. I feel hollow.

I know what would fill you…

Greta was right. I should have been dating more. Enjoying the touch of another person.

"August, don't be so pious. You must know a sex act when one is performed in front of you," I snap, annoyed that he isn't enjoying this how it is intended to be. My gaze locks on the figure, and I memorise every touch. "Sex should always be a beautiful act like this." I shrug casually.

Because voyeurism is a normal afternoon activity.

Wait! I do not do that. Ever!

But wouldn't it be nice…

I can slot it in right after listening to my favourite podcast and attending a pilates class. My limber diner would ride me until mindful bliss.

The woman leans back on her heels and stands. The man smiles at her and cups her chin approvingly, and she returns the gesture before licking her lips again. Meanwhile, his cock is bouncing between them like an eager third part.

"A toast," the man announces. His voice awakens the crowd, and they give a hellacious roar of applause.

The smog in my mind clears. I shake my head just to remove anything that dares to linger. I slump. The column I'm hiding behind is the only thing keeping me standing.

"August…" I say while not knowing what I need to ask for.

The man summons the servers again with a twirl of his finger. The people in black return with trays packed with the pink drink. They are efficient, and it doesn't take long for every person in the room to have one of those special drinks nursed in their hands.

The sweet, sticky smell intensifies to the point of discomfort and corrupts my senses again. I push off the column and try to check on the others, but every part of me wants to bear witness to this special occasion.

You'll regret missing the revolution. This is just the beginning.

"Stop it," I say through gritted teeth. "Something is very wrong."

"It must be the champagne," August groans. "Do you think this is what Julie was given? Enhancer."

"That wouldn't be a crazy assumption," I pant out. I swallow a few times and lift the train of my skirt to cover my mouth and nose. "Something is controlling their behaviour. Are you also struggling to keep your wits? Something is corrupting my thoughts."

"I'm struggling," Abby whines, eyes trained on her feet.

"Cover your mouth and nose, Abby. I think it is helping a little," I instruct. My head is a mess, but stopping more poison from getting into our systems must be a good thing. August does the same thing, covering his face with the bottom of his shirt.

The man starts a speech. He wraps an arm around the woman's shoulders, and she curls into his chest.

"I…" August loses the words. "I could concentrate better if that bastard stopped touching my lady."

"Do you know her?" I ask, swivelling back to stare at the woman.

"No… why did I… I don't want her." His eyes swing to me and darken.

I blink at him, stunned. Has he been infected with jealousy?

"We shouldn't linger here anymore. I don't know what answers we can discover while we are prone to some influencing drug," August says. I am grateful for having a logical idea to follow because I can't sting to sensical thoughts together.

A worrying thought pops into my head, and I glance at Abby.

“If the drink has the drug… It made Abby and I act relaxed and flirty. Does that mean we are about to witness an…” I trail off, stunned at the events unfolding below.

“Let’s get the main event started,” the man yells, calling everyone to action. Drinks are swallowed, and moans become a chorus.

Jackets are stripped off. Ties are discarded, and undershirts are revealed. Men become bare-chested while the women shimmy out of their dresses to expose lingerie.

A man captures my attention. He drags his fingers leisurely down a woman’s arm. The touch isn’t unwanted. It’s the complete opposite. Just the soft, seductive touch brings her to a consuming orgasm. Her singular bliss breaks something in the ballroom, and sexual madness ensues.

I drag my eyes back to the couple who set off this chain of events. They are reclined on the chaise. The man sprawled on his back with the woman lying on top of him, her panting chest raising dramatically with each breath as the man's hand plays with her most intimate parts.

“Why is this happening?” Abby growls at a level that’s bordering on a yell. Normally I’d be furious with her volume as it is not what I’d consider stealthy. In this place, it barely registers as a whisper against the squeals of pleasure.

A brazier is ripped, and a woman is bent over a table. The man who tore open the woman’s garment treats his pants the same way before impaling her with his bouncing hardness. Her cries of bliss are smothered when another man joins the encounter by presenting his cock next to her mouth. She sucks him down deep, and he shudders with joy.

Every woman has a man, or if no man is available, she rubs herself frantically on whatever she can find.

“Mina,” August barks. “Stop watching.” His demand is coated with a seductive murmur. He boldly steps from his hiding place and comes toward me. I gape up at him when he crowds my space. “I don’t like you watching that. I should be your centre of attention.”

My tongue peaks out to moisten my lips so he can truly enjoy the moment our mouths finally meet.

Why isn’t he kissing me? Why have we been putting it off for so long?

August fists my hair, his nose rubbing gently against mine.

I want him. Why have I been denying this desire that hasn't stopped swimming in my veins since he entered my home? He is consuming and overwhelming, the oxygen I need in my lungs.

His breath mingles with mine. My eyes flutter closed, ready to join with this man. Be one with this man.

"You will always be my centre, August Andino." I lean on my toes so our lips can finally connect. He is a mere inch away from always being yours.

Retching.

Vulgar retching.

The sour stench of the contents of a stomach assaults my senses.

Vomit.

My head clears with each gulp of air tainted with bile and acid.

August and I part like there is now an ocean between us, and I try to figure out why he's in my space and why his fingers are woven into my hair like they should be a part of me.

"Wwh…what?" I ask as the vomiting happens again. It's not me or August.

Abby!

I turn to seek out the young wolf. She is on her hands and knees as more liquid pours from her burning lips. Her eyes plead with me like she's in excruciating pain.

"Help!" she manages to gasp before she retches again. Her plea is what I needed to trigger my body back into reality.

"Get her to her feet," I hiss at August. I rage at myself for allowing us to be caught in such a vulnerable position.

My direction wipes August's confused expression back to his professional one. Somehow that's more comforting than anything else he could do right now.

That sweet scent curls and lovingly strokes my nostrils like it's a friend when really it is a foe. It fights against the rot from Abby's stomach that's keeping my senses in reality.

"I know this scent," I gasp. I couldn't decipher the smell due to the effects that kept pulling on my control of logic.

I am a fool for not realising it sooner. It's so obvious that it's almost as obscene as the scene below.

Whoever is behind this madness wouldn't just approach one fable for the key to their gift. They would approach others to build an arsenal. There is only one fable whose magic can affect their lover with seductive pheromones.

So stupid, Mina Harker. How could you have missed the obvious?

Rushing for the balcony, I scan the crowd for the face behind this chaos.

I know he is here.

The person behind this wouldn't be able to resist witnessing the sexual pandemonium they created. At the far end of the room is a raised platform, a temporary stage with a podium.

There, standing centre stage, is the man who has just had their name struck in red from my list of friends and added to my lengthening list of foes.

Dorian Grey.

The drug isn't a drug. It's a replica of Dorian Grey's pheromones.

Dorian is standing with an unfamiliar person, who is beaming at the intimate scenes playing out in every corner of the room. Neither seems phased by the events nor compelled by them. They must be immune.

"What have you done, Dorian?"

The deviant's mouth grows a seductive smile. Worried the scent will rob me of my will again, I move closer to Abby's vomit and let it burn my nostrils.

Creating a mind-altering drug from his fabled magic should be impossible. Then again, I thought replicating Griffin was impossible until Julie's murder unveiled the scheme. These witches have weaponized his pheromones as they did with Griffin's invisibility.

This just became so much bigger than the mysterious death of a human. I wish I could map the big picture and how the players fit into this game, but the noises coming from the over-enthused sex is too distracting. My heart rate slows. My eyes relax until they become impossible to open. I force another foul breath of vomit, and it dulls some of the effects of the drug again.

Stepping out into the open, emboldened to expose my knowledge. My dress is rough against my skin; I want to tear it off and be free of all earthly constraints.

Bare my body for the crowds below.

No! Keep your dress on. Damn it!

Like Dorian can sense a disruption in his mayhem, he glances up at the balcony. He's always been an expressive man, so he doesn't try to hide his surprise at my appearance at his event. His magnetic eyes trace what he can see of my form, and an amused brow hitches at the state of my attire.

Dorian raises his glass tumbler filled with dark liquor in the air. He tips it slightly at me, not looking away when he sips his imaginary toast. Like I was an aberration, he dismisses me by striking up a conversation with the man next to him.

I scramble from the balcony and grab Abby by the back of her dress as I scout for any way to escape this place. If we stay much longer, I know we will be partaking in the ballroom scene.

"We have to get out of here," I yell at August again over the crescendo of moans. "The air is infected with the drug, and I'm struggling to stay coherent in my thoughts."

August scoops Abby into his arms, and I check every room we pass until I find another hotel room we can enter. I throw the window open and gulp down the crisp, fresh air.

"We are climbing down," I tell them, not looking back for confirmation.

I use the lattice that's decorated in vines to help my balance as I climb onto the ledge. I drop to the ground. My knees jar at the fall, but I don't let it affect me as I scout for any stray security guards while August navigates getting down with Abby over his shoulder. He uses the vines to climb down until he can fall without disturbing Abby's prone form.

Once they are at my side, Abby struggles against August's hold. He helps Abby to her feet, but they can't support her enough to stop her from ending up on her knees as she gulps down the untainted air.

"I'm sorry, Abby, but we don't have time for you to recover here," I tell her when she resists August trying to help her to her feet.

"Fine," she says, allowing August to scoop her up again before our group takes off toward the trees lining the property. At the edge of the greenery, I let my shadows hunt for the magic encasing the building.

"Stop," I whisper. "The area is spelled." My shadows approach the magical barrier and send me some offensive profanity at the nastiness we almost ran through. "This is a memory curse," I say, focusing on what I can do to counter it with our limited resources.

“Damn it!” August growls as he places Abby down again.

“What does that mean?” Abby asks as she uses a tree as a leaning post.

“It means if we walk over some magical line, our memories will become jumbled. It will be set to affect any memories of this place. Or, if they are feeling particularly cruel, they might just remove chunks of time. Even years. This is not good,” August huffs.

“Just shut up, and let me think,” I snap at them. “My brain feels like it’s about to burst from my skull. Your anxiety isn’t helping my concentration.”

An uncharacteristic growl escapes August as he starts pacing.

I don’t know what to do. I’m rusty when it comes to spells and curses. Mages rely on our internal magics like my shadows or whatever magical line they are associated with. I only dabble in the external magics to know how to defend against them.

“Is there a break in the circle?” I ask my shadows.

“How would we know? We can’t even see the curse,” August scowls, believing I am asking him and not talking to my magic.

It’s an understandable mistake since speaking to your magic for a magic user puts you extremely close to the category of insane.

Gate.

That’s all I get. Our lives are on the line, and I get a one-word answer. I spy the gate bordering the property, which is securely behind the line that will damage our memories.

“Gate,” I mumble, hoping that saying it aloud will clarify what I’m meant to do.

“Oh! Do you mean the entry gate where vehicles drive in and out?” Abby asks eagerly. “That makes sense because you can’t have people arriving with no memories,” she adds with a limp chuckle.

I do the maths on that thought and agree with the logic.

“Yep, that’s exactly what I was thinking,” I blatantly lie, knowing both wolves will be able to smell it. “If we keep this same distance from the tree line, we will be safe from the border of the curse.” I duck between trees as I make my way to the front of the building. August continues cradling Abby to his chest, following closely.

“You were right, Abby. There is a break in the curse to allow for traffic in and out of the building. It’s narrow, only extends a foot wider than

the pavement," I say. "Once we clear the road, we can scale the gate to get over it." I point ahead at the polished metal gate. It's not as secure as the stone walls built around the rest of the area, giving us easy foot holds for the climb.

"Ready?" August asks, focusing on the sprint ahead.

With a running jump, my hands latch onto a bar midway up the gate. With a few quick steps, I hoist myself up and sit upright, straddling the gate. Scouting the area below, a few guards loiter around the gate's perimeter at varied intervals. No one is an immediate concern since they are all facing outward, not expecting a threat to be lying in wait behind them.

I lean down so my chest kisses the cold metal, and my hand reaches for Abby's. Standing on August's shoulders, Abby stumbles, almost missing my hand, but we just connect with our fingertips. She lets me take her weight so I can hoist her up with me. August joins us with an easy jump and fancy footwork. We all jump down together with a quiet thud.

This time Abby shakes him off when August tries to pick her up again. "I'm fine now. I would like to finish this journey on my own."

We find cover behind a row of hedging and take a moment to plot the next steps of our escape.

"Over there!" Abby points at a security car parked by the entrance gate. Two guards lean on it, chatting animatedly. "If we incapacitate the guards, we can take the car."

"Agreed," August says, running a thoughtful hand over his chin.

"I cannot tell from here. Can you scent what they are?" I ask.

"I think they are witches," Abby says, and August adds his agreement.

Not wanting to put Abby and August in a fight while still not recovered, I allow my shadows to cause the chaos they've been desperate for since I consumed the witch's blood in the cell.

"Go," I tell my magic.

They fly from my wiggling fingers and swarm around me until they mimic the build of a burly human form. They fade to a dusty red and create the illusion of walking as they move toward the guards. You'd only spot them if you knew to look for them. They blend into the nightscape perfectly.

The shadow person reaches an arm out, and the fingers curl around the throat of the first guard. The witch's eyes bulge as he tries to grasp and

claw at his throat to no avail because my shadows can touch him, but his hands only pass through them.

I instruct my magic to squeeze the pressure point on his throat to render him unconscious. The other guard starts yelling for help as he eases his convulsing colleague to the ground.

I dash from the hiding spot and leap for the second guard to quieten him. He doesn't notice me until it's too late. My arms are around his neck, copying my shadows' motions. Both men slip into the dirt as oxygen is robbed from their lungs. I check both of their pulses before hunting for the car keys. I'm content to leave them unconscious but alive.

I walk to the car with my shadows falling in step next to me. When I attempt to call them back to me, they shake their human-shaped head and point at the car's passenger door. I open it, and they slide into the seat.

"August, you drive," I call, climbing into the front passenger seat. Abby hesitates when my shadows turn their shadow-head to face her. It's disconcerting how they replicate the orifices of the human face without bothering to fill them with anything representing reality.

"Weird is becoming my new normal," Abby mutters as she slides in.

She barely has the door closed before August speeds off.

Chapter 21

Mina

It’s silent in the car. I have so much I want to say or scream, yet verbalising my bafflement has become impossible. Abby shifts in the back seat, and I check on her by using the makeup mirror on the sun visor. She’s pale and staring blankly out of her window. A complete contrast to August, who is brimming with energy. His deep, heavy breaths keep breaking any attempt I make at owning a coherent thought.

The car swerves off the road and into a service lane before jerking to a stop that forces my hands to catch me from being thrown forward into the dashboard.

“August,” I snap before checking that Abby is still in one piece. She rubs her head, seeming dazed.

August storms out of the car, slamming the door. The impact of his effort has the whole vehicle rock. I follow after him with less aggression directed at the innocent vehicle.

“August!” I yell again as I march up behind him. He spins and stares me down at me with his damn irritating dominance radiating off him. People who think my shadows are abrasive need to face off with this terror.

“Tone it down!” I hiss as I spin around to get my bearings. My weak threat becomes a violent snarl when I locate the Guard building mockingly sitting on the other side of the road. This is the last place I want to be right now with the knowledge of doom we just discovered. “Why are we here? We need to go back to the apartment.” I need my twins right now. Nothing else matters until I can touch them again.

August closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, letting the tension shed off him. “Did you see who was orchestrating this?” he asks, ignoring my demand.

“Yes, I saw exactly who is behind all of this,” I grind out. I point to one of the cameras on the perimeter of the building. “I don’t want to discuss any of this out in the open.”

My magic still is depleted and refuses to return to me as it sits in the back seat next to Abby. My body may be mostly healed, but that doesn't mitigate needing rest. And that's not even considering how my mental state has been stretched dangerously close to straitjacket territory.

Fed up and wanting to find my twins, I step backwards. As I start to turn around, August grabs my elbows and steers me to the building. Abby struggles with the door to the car before following close behind. I glance back at my magic, which relents with our growing distance and dissolves so it can trickle back to me.

"Couldn't you have parked any closer? I'm still aching all over," I grumble as we walk past a series of empty parking bays.

"I don't have my swipe access. Or my phone. Or my fucking car keys. Or anything that would be helpful right now to access this building."

I laugh at the absurdity of the complaint. It builds to hysterical and needing to wipe tears from my eyes. Abby rushes forward as we approach a door. She types in a code pin and presses her finger on a scanner which has the glass doors sliding open for our entry.

We move through the levels of the building, but when August directs me toward Van Helsing's office, I really put effort into shaking my arm free from his grip.

"Absolutely not. I'm not ready to deal with him right now. I need my twins." My heels dig into the carpet, which does nothing against August's tightening grip. "I need to process this evening's events. I need a shower. Then enjoy a relaxing spa day. Or maybe, a trip to a casino since I am feeling extremely lucky to still have my freedom. I need to contemplate the meaning of life at some prehistoric piece of nature… I need to be anywhere but in the presence of a man I will kill as this is somehow his fault due to his poor judgement centuries ago."

Not killing Dracula.

"He's immortal. He cannot die," August says with no muster, just stating the obvious and very infuriating fact.

"Don't remind me of that. That just makes stabbing him much more enticing." A rueful smile stretches across my face, making me feel on the precipice of insanity.

August pauses and glares over his shoulder at me. "Stop with your nonsense. Mina Harker, you, of all creatures, must take this situation seriously." This tone is curt, bordering on cruel.

“Let me go,” I snap. His hold on me relaxes, and I pull away. “I am not someone at your beck and call.”

August’s head hangs and shakes with limp dejection as he growls under his breath.

“I don’t have time to coddle you right now. This is bigger than your issues with one man. This is bigger than your need to be the centre of attention and all your weird quirks. Your psychotic choice of family. A vendetta against the world. Always acting like you are worse off than the rest of us who have to deal with the same shit with less access to power. This is life and death for the rest of us, Mina. So pay it the appropriate amount of respect.”

His words are a punch to the gut, especially after everything that has transpired since we started working what feels like an eternity ago. Abby suddenly appears at my back, her body radiating with tension and hands trembling at her side. She silently followed us with a despondent expression that has now transformed into fury.

“Do not speak to Mina like that,” Abby growls, with an added bark.

August is taken aback as she links her arm through mine. August’s lips curl into a cruel expression before he storms off, and we follow at a healthy distance.

“Thank you,” I whisper under my breath.

“I have never seen him like this before. He’s normally so calm and friendly,” Abby whispers.

“I think tonight has frightened him,” I reply, trying to excuse his barbs so they hurt less. “Being in that cage would be traumatising for anyone.” I don’t add my suspicion that the core of his anger is more about who we discovered on the stage overseeing the…orgy.

“I know I will be processing everything I saw tonight for months.”

“Mmh…”

“Abraham Van Helsing!” August bellows, causing everyone in the area who wasn’t already staring at us to freeze and turn in our direction.

Abraham’s office door cuts slowly across the carpet as it opens. The man who demanded I be found and dragged back into this nightmare saunters into the pen of workers without even a curious line on his brow as to why August is making such a ruckus.

“Stay in our office until I can find someone to take you home and protect you,” I tell Abby. She doesn’t need to be told twice before she

rushes back the way we came, with her hands holding up the masses of material of her dress.

Abraham's head tilts at Abby's quick retreat.

August is halfway to him, but I use my speed to flash by the angry wolf so I can be the one to throw the immortal man back into his office. Before anyone can join us, I slam the door shut, lock it, and use my shadows as an additional defence barrier.

"What is the meaning of this, Mina?" Abe yells stunned from his sprawled position on the ground. He stands slowly, checking his suit isn't crumpled, before giving me his attention. "Couldn't you have cleaned yourself up before coming in here and parading around the office like you are a creature who resides under a bridge? This isn't how we do things anymore. Gore is left at the door." His lips smirk at his unintentional rhyme, making me want to lash out violently all the more.

"We need to talk. What have –" My words freeze on my tongue as August smashes through the locked door and walks straight through my shadows like they aren't there – like I hadn't requested they incapacitate anyone who approaches.

August is unphased by them, even though they should be zapping him until he is on his knees begging for relief.

"Why didn't you stop August," I whisper to my magic. I don't mind that he is here to witness me string Abe up by his testicles. I just wish they would follow my orders and not pick and choose what they want to obey.

Silence. They don't respond or send me any images.

My magic is never silent like this. They are always making their creepy demands.

I don't have time to unpack whatever this means. It is so menial in the scheme of tonight's events.

Abe also gapes at August's miraculous disregard of my shadows. He has experienced their wrath on occasion.

I smirk to hide my annoyance so Abe doesn't realise that August making it into the room wasn't an intentional decision.

"We were taken this evening. Mina and Abby were held as prisoners," August snarls. I notice that he conveniently doesn't mention the part about him being caged and trafficked back into servitude. His hand smashes through Abe's desk. Splinters fly as fresh blood taints the air. "Bastian is behind this whole thing."

Bastian? Who is that?

Abe's feet test the limits of my patience as he walks to his chair like that news doesn't mean anything to him. Sitting, he adjusts himself, only giving us his attention when he is ready and on his terms. Some things never change. Abe should have a power pose named after him.

I chuckle sardonically at that thought and follow his cue by slumping into one of his single seaters opposite him. My thighs spread wide to fill the chair, which is not as imposing when my legs are confined by a floor-length sequin skirt that shimmers like a disco ball.

"I would like to hear this story from the beginning," the pompous ass says.

August tries to speak, but the anger he's choking on gets the better of him. He marches to the bar that's mounted in the middle of busy bookshelves and pours himself a stiff drink. That drink is downed before another is poured, and this time it's swirled in his grip.

"Before we get into that messy business," I say, taking control of the conversation and directing it to my coming list of demands. "Abby was with us tonight. She is likely in shock and needs to be taken somewhere safe to recover. She also recovering from several broken bones. She has a limp, so something in her leg needs to be checked –" Abe tries to speak, but I cut him off. For the first time in maybe a century, Abraham pales as a hand ruffles his hair. "We will get to how she got hurt when August details tonight's events. I have told Abby to stay in the little office until someone comes to collect her." Abe nods like my words are reasonable. I shoot him a grin in sick glee, knowing my next words will push the boundary of reasonable. "She will be collected by Greta and stay with me for the foreseeable future unless she otherwise objects. That is my only caveat to this conversation."

"She was with you… kidnapped," Abe says, seemingly stuck on that point.

I nod. He pulls out his phone, and his fingers fly across the screen, typing a message. He assesses me with one of his clinical stares.

"I have asked Fenris to take her to your apartment with *them*. No need for either of *them* to come here." He pauses and sighs with tightly closed eyes. "I'm assuming, since you are demanding custody of her, that you found out her background tonight?"

Custody… The idea makes me want to vomit as much as Abby did in the mansion hotel.

"You'd be correct," I scoff, shaking my head because I'm still in disbelief about discovering a new fable. "And don't think that being so agreeable will earn you any brownie points."

After all these years, the world still finds ways to stun me, and Abraham Van Helsing has his shit-frosted nose in the middle of it. I seethe knowing that nothing can be said to undo the damage from another of his secrets.

"I want to punish you for never notifying me that you had discovered a new fable. I want to hurt you so badly, Abe," I grind out, knowing now is not the time to continue this argument. August is about to tear out of his skin and maim some people in his alternative form if we don't move this conversation along quickly. "Does any other fable know of her existence apart from Griffin?

"Griffin knows about her?" Abraham allows more emotions to play on his features.

I bite back a curse at that question. "You should have given her to me and not kept her chained to you." I take a deep breath. It doesn't help as my shadows flitter frantically, trying to break my command to keep formation as a barrier.

"You didn't want to be part of this community anymore. You made that perfectly clear by your silent absence, Mina," Abe replies, getting to his feet as his pointer finger stabs the desk.

"I would have come back for her," I snap. "I would have come for any new fable."

"Fine. Done," Abe says like he's won the argument and sits down again with an amused smile. "She is now yours to care for, Mina. I hate those monsters you cohabit with, but I can't fault their protectiveness for those in their care. I'm sure they also are knowledgeable enough to help her gain control over her different wolf forms."

August remained unremarkably quiet for a man brimming with the fire from the depths of hell. Silence equals guilt in my eyes. I won't hold him accountable this time since his relationship with me is new. I will not allow an omission like this to happen again unpunished.

I twist to check on him over my shoulder. August is frozen, his glass pressed against his lips, watching our interaction. It's written all over him

that he already knew her secret. I shoot him a challenging stare waiting to hear an objection pass his lips. Shockingly his response is an approving nod, and something softens in him. It's slight, but it's there.

Who else here knows about Abby? Is it an open secret ripe for the picking for unsavoury actors like Griffin and Dorian?

Abe's phone vibrates. "Fenris is on his way to collect her."

I want to object to Fenris getting involved in something that is now considered my business, but he has only shown an interest in Abby's safety, so I'll forget how much I hate him until she is delivered to the twins. Abe slides his phone back into his pocket and relaxes with his arms lying casually on the armrest.

"Alright, Andino, it's your turn. I want to know what happened and why you are accusing Bastian of being part of a conspiracy to kidnap you."

"We met up with Griffin," I chime in before August gets a chance.

"You spoke with him?" Abe asks, leaning forward enough that the leather in his chair rumbles. August places a glass of whiskey in front of me, then sets another in front of Abe. It's a kindness I wasn't expecting, and the drink is very appreciated.

August stands behind me in what I hope is meant to be a sign of silent support. The heated words from before must be on the back burner.

I keep speaking when he doesn't budge from claiming the position of the rod at my back.

"It was an ambush. Abby, August, and I were taken after our vehicle was totalled," I explain before filling Abe in with the rest of the details of the night.

I glance around the office for a clock and have to cock my head to read the watch wrapped on Abe's wrist. Somehow, there is still enough time for me to safely return to the apartment. Though we are going to have to wrap up this conversation fast.

"We planned our escape at the best and worst possible time," I muse as some of the nude athleticism takes centre stage in the story. "This evening's events turned us into unexpected voyeurs. We made an easy escape while everyone was distracted by all the…umm, orgy."

Abe takes a sip of his drink at the wrong time, and it sputters out of his mouth as I share those details.

"Orgy?" he says as a white handkerchief appears from his breast pocket to dab his chin. "This tale is becoming surreal, Mina. Tall tales were

never something you were known for."

I growl at that comment, and he raises his hands in surrender.

"Orgies. Sex parties." He shakes his head in dismay. "That sounds like nonsense that…" His head cocks to the side before understanding dawns behind his eyes. "Dorian Grey. He's part of this?"

"Sure is," I say, taking a sip, enjoying the warmth as it burns my throat. "We stumbled across answers we didn't know we were trailing. These witches have somehow turned Dorian's pheromones into a drug that can influence people's behaviour. They call it Enhance. We've only seen it in a sexual context, but I'd be curious to know if it can be used in other ways."

"They were drinking it. The effects were almost immediate. The dosage was so potent that we were experiencing some of the effects," August adds.

The moment that August and I shared on the balcony tries to surface. I stop those forbidden thoughts in its tracks, never wanting to dip my toe back into that warped attraction. The ancient wolf must smell some change in my emotions as his head whips in my direction. I ignore him and any other feelings he stirs in me.

"Dorian saw me." I sigh before taking another sip. "The fiend even raised his glass to me like we were at a garden party." I glance back to August for his thoughts on the re-emergence of Dorian. "What do you think? We couldn't have moved any closer to listen to conversations, not with that drug tainting the air." August looks confused by my question. "You didn't see him?" I ask.

"I don't know what he looks like," August replies, finally choosing to sit in the chair beside me. "Was he the male standing next to Bastian?" At the mention of the name, his eyes darken as his inner beast momentarily surfaces.

Now, Abe's eyebrows end up in his hairline. "Bastian was with Dorian?"

"Who is this Bastian?" I ask as I shift forward in my seat.

"I forget how much you've missed these last decades." Abe rubs his forehead, giving me an exasperated look. "August is referring to Sebastian Lurie. He's a member of Galen's Pack."

I used to be versed in knowing all the ruling members, yet I've never heard of this Bastian. He can't be that important if I've never heard of

him.

“So Galen Emyr is tangled in this. Is that what you’re implying?” I ask. I am not a fan of Galen Emyr or his band of politics, but he has never been one to openly flaunt breaking the rules. He’s a stickler for the rules to the point of cruelty. Never keen to forgive and always willing to administer a death sentence.

“Galen? No. I’m quite certain he wouldn’t be part of this. You know how he feels about fables. If he could get his way, he’d find ways to kill all of you. He would never be part of a ploy to replicate their magic. I wonder what connection Bastian has with Dorian.”

“It’s easy for any ruler to know a fable. They always seek them out to try and have them in their corner for a future power play.”

If you live long enough, most people are eventually acquainted with Dorian Grey. The man has a knack for popping up in unexpected places. And if people haven’t met him, then they are well-versed in his mythology. It’s not surprising that someone from the ruling families would speak with him.

“Not a ruler or a person holding any meaningful power. He is not in a direct line to any inherited position of authority,” August growls.

“And not particularly dominant either,” Abe muses, swirling his drink.

“Both of you are building to an idea. Can you skip the candour and get to the point?” I say to the men.

Abe pauses for a long moment. This time it’s not because he’s pulling a power play but because he is considering the consequences of the information he wants to share.

“Are your shadows soundproofing the room?” he asks. His long, endless years shine through the lines creasing his face. When I nod, he continues speaking. “My best guess? There is a plot afoot to overtake the Council. Griffin confirmed that when you were in the cells. The dissenters will be supernaturals who can’t use their gifts to gain the position. They will hold little to no power while also sitting closely near powerful people.” He states that with too much confidence; this isn’t the first time he’s considered this.

“Like a wolf lacking in dominance,” August says, nodding his agreement.

I shrug at that glib news and stand. “Not my circus, not my monkeys. I’ve done my part as promised.” I turn to leave the room since my part is done. I have solved the mystery of Julie’s death. I have discovered new magic. And most importantly, I have unearthed a plot to upheave the stability of our world. My stamp card is full, and it’s time for me to take my final curtsey, exit and move somewhere remote, like Greenland. Or even Antarctica.

“It will be your circus if Dracula is reinstated as the ruler of the vampire family,” Abe replies.

I spin and hiss at Abe with my fangs bared and ready to cause a lot of damage. August is suddenly in front of me, arms wrapped tightly.

“His name has been mentioned a lot today. I’m reaching the end of my tether,” I hiss. “What do you know? Have you heard of his whereabouts?”

“I was approached a while ago with suspicions of a plot arising. One that is very similar to what you learned tonight. The person reaching out was from a prominent family. I have sent some of my most loyal and neutral guards to investigate the claims. They have either gone missing or _”

“They hid their loyalty well and aren’t willing to betray the rebels,” I summarise as I pull myself from August’s hold.

Abe hums. “You have given me the most evidence of anyone yet. Shame that none of it is physical that I can take to the Council.”

“Sorry I couldn’t get a signed confession from Griffin. I was too busy running for my life,” I scoff with arms crossed.

“We must collect Bastian and interrogate him about his role in this,” Abe says, ignoring my sarcasm. He stands and walks toward me.

At the mention of Bastian’s name, August growls and only stops when he forces himself to finish his drink.

“You still haven’t explained what that has to do with Dracula.”

“The informant. They were a vampire. They hinted that…”

“He was behind this,” I nod. “Where are they now?”

“Mina, one day we will have to air our grievances with each other,” Abe speaks with the conviction of a man believing he was betrayed by me. “Right now, you must accept the reality we find ourselves now facing and put aside everything else.” Abe tries to take my hand in a supportive gesture. It’s something he used to do whenever I needed comfort or a

confidence boost. A gentle squeeze of silent and unwavering support. The action used to mean everything to me; now, it burns.

I take several steps away and lock my arms to my sides. Abe exhales heavily before continuing to convince me to join whatever manipulation he is planning.

“I need you to become a Hunter and lead a team like you once did. I know that this place isn’t perfect. But the supernatural world isn’t perfect. Neither is the human world. There will always be corruption, murder, and many other cancerous things infecting the worst of us. Just like any society. The Guard is trying to save supernatural lives by enforcing our laws on those who used to be absent of them.” He takes a deep breath and adjusts his cufflinks. “We no longer need to live in an archaic world. The Guard has become the cornerstone of peace. If we crumble, then the Council won’t have a chance at maintaining its hold on society. Do you truly believe that we would be better off without them?” He pauses to let the rhetorical question hang between us. I know that we need leadership. Even a corrupt one can still keep the peace among the masses. The Council has always had a tenuous hold on power. “Mina, it’s time to come home.”

Everything in me screams to run and leave these power-hungry animals to fight over the final decaying bone of our society until Abby pops into my mind. The information I learnt in the cell confirms that her life will only be safe when she has the protection of those like Van Helsing. And me. Without us, she will end up on a slab being experimented on, just like what the witches want to do will all of the fables. Griffin has proven to me this evening that what makes fables special is now a marketable product, and we are the keys to our own demise.

“Do it for Jonathan,” Abe adds, building the end of his pitch. “He was a mage of principle. He was the one who wanted us all to be the best versions of ourselves.” Abe retreats behind his desk when I remain blank and unmoving at his pathetic plight to use my deceased husband against me.

He leans forward, supporting himself with his fingers.

“Creating the Guard is what I could do to honour him and his legacy. Every day I do my best to be the man he thought I was,” Abe says. His gaze darts away. That’s the closest I’ll get as a sign of grief for his dear friend.

“Jonathan Harker is dead. Dracula killed him,” I state before moving to the door. My head shakes in disgust. “The dead do not get to

have an opinion on the lives of the living.” My hand grips the handle as I glance back. I pity the delusional man hiding behind his desk.

The word no is on the tip of my tongue, but Abby flashes forward again, and this time the young wolf is joined by images of my twins. They are ancients, but how safe will they remain when people start hunting us for harvesting? And what about August? I barely know the man; his captivity tonight makes it clear that he is not safe from an attack by the fae. All these moving parts have jagged edges, yet this puzzle doesn’t fit together to create one cohesive vision.

I was once the sword, the executioner. A creature of the dark who did what others couldn’t.

I don’t know if I can be a weapon anymore.

My head aches with the exhaustion from tonight's peril. All my questions are finding answers, and they are fusing together to create a brick road I don’t want to follow.

Just like the twins knew our retirement was temporary, I know there is no pondering what I will do. My decision has nothing to do with what Jonathan would want of me because I was transformed into a fable. A monster of revenge, and it’s time I truly claim that mantel.

“I will not be joining the Guard. I will not bow down and do the Council's bidding any longer. Never again,” I say slowly, making sure I enjoy the flavour of each syllable. “Nonetheless –” Abe tries to interject, so I continue speaking over him. “I will do my part to end those who are so crudely stealing magic that is not theirs to take.” There isn’t much I believe in anymore. I do, however, believe, down to the depths of my core, that every fable was gifted with their magic for a reason. It is ours and, therefore, ours to protect. “I will do this, Abraham. Not for you or the ghost of my long-deceased husband, but for myself because I deserve my revenge. The revenge you robbed of me.”

I open his office door and let my shadows flood the surrounding space before sucking them in to form my cape.

People hovering in the hall gasp. I ignore them.

“Summon the Council, Van Helsing, because they need to know what was learnt this evening,” I yell over my shoulder, not slowing down as I leave.

My shadows still vibrate with pent-up energy, so I let some of them mess with anyone who doesn’t move out of my way quickly enough.

Though, I think most people are staring at the sequinned outfit covered in blood and filth I'm traipsing around in. If they tried, I'm sure they could also get a whiff of Enhancer.

The lift doors open just as I arrive like fate is high fiving me. The people shuffling out give me a wide berth. I press the button to hold the lift open so the excess of my shadows can stroll on. For some reason, they are in the person form again. I chuckle as the rest of my magic, cloaking me, fills out the form. The shadow person now has an accompanying briefcase.

"Is this going to become the new normal?" I ask. They remain facing forward. I can't stop an amused snort when they tap their fake foot while checking their wrist like they have somewhere important to be. I press the button for the ground floor.

As the elevator dings to advertise the intention to close the doors, a massive hand appears between them. They halt before sliding open again.

August joins me on the lift like we are water-cooler colleagues colliding during a workday and nothing more. He blinks at my shadows and then faces the doors like this is not weird.

Because it is… This is so weird.

"Evening," August greets my magic as he leans ever so slightly toward the red human. I notice that August is carrying a satchel similar to what my shadows are replicating. They really have grown fond of him if they are now copying his accessories.

"Don't encourage them," I mutter, and he flashes me a delighted grin. The door finally closed so we can start the journey out of this building.

Something cool is slipped between my fingers. I lift the bottle of Red-Eye and stare at it before gazing up at the man. I have fed deeply twice tonight, but I can't refuse the temptation of a cool drink before this night is over.

"I'm sorry, Mina. My words before were cruel and mean. And worse than that, they were taunting and downplaying your past. I hope you can forgive –"

"Forgiven," I quickly say. He sags, knowing I speak the truth because the truth is that I forgave him the moment he stood at my back in Abraham's office.

"And about what happened back at the hotel… what we almost did –"

“Never happened. Definitely don’t ever want to talk about it.” I crack open the bottle and take a large gulp, not breaking eye contact with the wolf. Some weight leaves August’s shoulders. When I emerge from my sip, I ask, “Do you have Van Helsing’s permission to leave with me?” I make sure to infuse the words with a little taunt.

“I am a free man. Now and forever. I will do as I please,” he replies with a stunning grin. It surprises me that I choke on my next gulp. “I don’t understand your history with the Council. The Families. The Guard. What I do understand is that if I want to be on the right side of our history, then I need to be working with Mina-Fucking-Harker. The lady in red. Where you are is where I will be, Mina Harker.”

I gape up at him as my hand slowly lowers the drink to my side. The lift doors open at the ground floor car park. August walks out of the building while my feet keep me cemented in place.

He chuckles when he finds me still inside the elevator.

“Everything we learned this evening, and it is me wanting to continue working with you that has shocked you into a catatonic state.” He shakes his head as he returns to hold the lift doors open for my exit.

I clear my throat and pretend to scout for danger so I don’t have to make eye contact with him as he humbles me with his declaration. I force my legs to work, and they carry me further into the car park. August takes the lead, and I follow him to a grey truck that doesn’t fit the classic black variety we’ve been driving around in. I get in and put on my seatbelt before taking a moment to examine the interior. The dashboard is lightly coated in dust. There is a muskiness of his scent mixed with the leather seats. The back seat is lined with different suit jackets that have been discarded after a long day in the office. Even with the light mess, everything is tidy and mostly clean. The way August slides into his seat and it moulds to his massive form tells me this is his personal vehicle. Somehow that fact makes all of this become real. August Andino is joining me in this crusade.

“Mina,” August says with uncertainty as we sit side by side, facing the waking morning. “You were missing for years. Then you reappeared and moved to the suburbs without any obvious reason. And there you stayed.”

“Do you have a question, or are you stating facts?” I reply, deliberately playing coy.

“What brought you back?”

I shift in my seat to face him. A sly curve taints my lips.

“That’s simple. So simple you’ll hate the answer.”

“I’d like to hear it anyway,” August says, fingers tapping the wheel again and reminding me how this only started days ago.

“I remembered who I am,” I say, and August nods like he accepts that reasoning, so I give him a little more. “It took a while to find peace with my purpose. I won’t lie about that. I was lost and empty after the betrayal was exposed. I was scared for a time. Terrified of what Dracula would do to me when he finally came to end me.” I clear my throat.

“What changed?”

“Me.” I hold out my palm. A sprinkling of my magic dances across my hand and up my arm. I don’t tell him anymore because it’s none of his business.

I was dying on the damp stone cell floor in Dracula’s personal dungeon. I knew my ending was coming, but I refused to let go of my rage and need for revenge. I refused to die because I still had a purpose that forced my body to evolve into something new. I was determined to destroy everyone who had ripped apart my family and stole my future.

I am a creature of revenge. Seven years ago, I was reminded that I am a product of vengeance, and it was time to make plans.

August nods like my answer is acceptable as his car roars to life under his command.

“What’s next, partner?” August asks as he pulls out of the building and into the beginning of a new day. He leans across my lap to flick open the satchel he had dumped at my feet. There, sitting in a crisp white paper bag, is a stack of musk sticks. My favourite treat.

I laugh as I gleefully tear through the pink sweet. I shift in my seat to take in my new partner and offer him a pink sugar hit.

August eyes the treat sceptically before taking a dainty nibble. His reaction is minimal, but it’s still there – a simmering of appreciation and enjoyment.

I knew he would be a good guy because night and day may be opposites, but neither can evolve into tomorrow without the other chasing it.

“I’m going to kiss my twins for luck. I’ll probably yell at Greta for letting us walk into a trap that almost ended our lives. Then *we* are

enjoying some well-deserved, undisturbed sleep. Then… after that?" I give him a wicked grin. "We are hunting Dorian-fucking-Grey."

He meets my grin as we enjoy the rest of our ride with the sweet cadence of a rustling paper bag.

About The Author

Morgan Stewart

Morgan lives in Melbourne with her extremely tolerant husband, two rascally daughters and snuggly dogs.
When she’s not living in her imagination and writing, Morgan is consuming too many sweets and caffeine while performing the great balancing act of life work and motherhood.

Books By This Author

Audrey Part 1

Audrey Part 2

Soundless Cora (The Nameless Bird Series)

Reckless Red (The Nameless Bird Series)